TYRO VOGEL'S
EXTATICA

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Is everything connected? Is there a world beyond our own? Is reality subjective to our perception? Is there a way to escape death? Is there a need to? On the day her life changes from bad to terminal, Irina Filidilupi finds the answers she's looking for in a man named Victor. He is a renegade scientist who, together with his younger brother, found a way to tap into the core of the universe itself. It is this technology that Irina's new friend wants her to try. Technology that is as likely to become her salvation as it is to hasten the end of the world. This book features mind-bending trips to other planes of reality, ninjas, giant robots, violence, drug use, sword fights, and hardcore pornography. Read with discretion.

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Tyro Vogel's
EXTATICA

Part I

Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.

Songs of Solomon 4:5

1
The Monkey Suit Man

What happened between them was the clash of two hearts bent on getting what each wanted.

Irina wanted passion, art, adventure. Most of all, she wanted adventure. Her boyfriend, or, rather, her ex-boyfriend, wanted a comfortable life set against traditional family values. He'd said she was "special," that he'd been simply "too normal" for her. He should've known what he was getting into when he decided to date a redhead. This was months ago, but today Irina remembered that conversation well. Today was the day when everything had gotten much, much worse. She'd paid a visit to the hospital to check a small lump under her collarbone and had gotten the news of a lifetime: she had breast cancer.

Irina had been on her feet ever since, walking the streets of Budapest as if to stop meant to die.

The sun had already set by the time her tired feet had carried her to Margaret Island. She couldn't run from this forever. Irina's grandmother had died of breast cancer. It wasn't pretty. They'd amputated both her breasts, then she died anyway. But her grandmother had been nearly seventy when she was diagnosed; Irina was barely twenty-three. *Life's a bitch,* she thought, *and then you die.* It was a morbid disposition. What she really needed to do was to sit down and get her head in order.

Moonlight stretched across the Danube River, the full moon reflected in its waves. Runners conquered the island's perimeter, speeding along in segregated groups. The younger, less healthy-looking crowd contrasted them by occupying the benches on both sides of the runway, alcohol bottles in hand.

She headed past them and down to the water, planning to sit as close to the river as possible, when a man's voice made her stop.

"Excuse me?" the man said in English.

Irina turned around. He sat on a bench a dozen meters away from the teenagers. She couldn't see well in the dim light, but she found his features more hawkish than attractive, all angles and perpendiculars. His eyes were the color of faded cobalt, twinkling behind a pair of spectacles. Irina even noted the practical elegance of his haircut, a bit gray at the temples, before she realized the man was dressed as a monkey from the neck down. He wore a two color body jumpsuit of white-and-brown, complete with a tail hanging down from the bench. Either the circus was in town, or *her* kind of breast cancer came with

hallucinations.

Irina closed her eyes slowly and then opened them again. She considered that maybe she needed to take her illness more seriously. The man in the monkey suit wasn't helping.

"Yes?" she said, also in English. It had been nearly four years since she'd moved from Italy, but she'd never really gotten the hang of the Hungarian. At least the monkey suit madman's intrusion on her brooding came in a language she understood.

"Is everything all right, young lady?"

Young lady? The man looked older than most of her peers on the arts faculty, true, but he couldn't have been a year older than thirty-five. *Young lady, huh.*

"Why are you dressed like a monkey?" she asked.

"That's a long story." He took out a piece of paper from the bag next to him and unfolded it on his knees. He then took out a shaving cream canister and unscrewed the bottom. Lumps of foil and some roll paper were hidden in the secret compartment inside. He unwrapped one of the lumps, dropping the green contents onto the paper.

"Are you rolling a joint?"

In answer, he stayed quiet as he rolled a long cigarette, packed tightly with marijuana.

"Blue Skunk," he said. "My brother grows it."

Irina wasn't a big smoker, but she appreciated a spliff now and again. On occasion, it helped her see things from a perspective she might have otherwise ignored; a good thing for her art. Whether it was good for anything else remained to be seen. Then she remembered she'd just been diagnosed with a terminal illness. *Her life. Right.*

"And why would you want to tell that to a random stranger?" she asked.

He smiled as he lit his joint. "Probably because I'm stoned."

Not very clever, this one, she thought. "Right… is that why you stopped me, to ask me if I'm all right too? Or do you think I don't look all right?"

"You look gorgeous," he said.

Irina chuckled. The moment she thought her life couldn't possibly get any worse, she got hit on by a stoner dressed in a monkey outfit. *Typical.*

"Thanks. Now, why are you wearing this?"

"Like I've said, it's hard to explain." He offered her the joint. She hesitated for a moment, then crossed the distance between them and took it from his fingers. "My name is Victor."

She inhaled, held the smoke in her lungs, and felt a prickling sensation spread through her body as THC entered her system. It was

strong. “I’m, I’m… Irina,” she said between coughs, passing the joint back to him.

“Do you believe in the unity of all things, Irina? Nikola Tesla once said that his brain was only a receiver for the knowledge, strength and inspiration sent to him from the core of the Universe.”

“Uh-huh. So that’s why you’re dressed like a monkey? Because Nikola Tesla made you do it?” Irina bit her lip. If Victor was a genuine crazy, then she was playing with fire. He took three long puffs and passed.

“Intriguingly enough,” he continued, ignoring the question, “a lot of people who participated in experiments with dimethyltryptamine during the psychedelic seventies said exactly the same thing.”

“Di-what?”

“Dimethyltryptamine. A psychedelic compound present in almost every living organism. To what purpose, we do not know. The Shamans of the South American jungles had been using DMT plants in their rituals for thousands of years. To give you an idea of what it does, if eating three grams of magic mushrooms sets you drifting on a little sailboat, then fifty micrograms of DMT blasts you into a different dimension on a space rocket. It shows you a world that makes you question what is possible… what is real… and what is important.”

Bloody hell, Irina thought, *he’s crazy, all right.* The best course of action was a speedy retreat. She had enough problems to deal with already. “This is certainly very interesting,” she said, trying to sound genuinely awed, “but I think I’d rather be on my way. I’ve a lot of things on my mind. Please excuse me. It was nice meeting you.” She gave him back his joint.

“This is why,” Victor said, as if she hadn’t opened her mouth, “I wear the monkey suit. Sometimes after a trip there, coming to the island and putting it on feels like the only sane thing to do. It reminds me that I, just like them,” — he nodded toward the teenagers to their right — “am a monkey man living in a monkey world. I sit here in this costume and think about all the things we can do to make it less… monkey-like.”

“Like what?” she asked. *Messing with crazies.* How could she resist?

“Like putting an end to the consumer-producer mentality. Like separating money from the state the same way the church had to be separated from it before it had a chance to cause more damage. Like encouraging experiments with human awareness instead of banning natural substances because some giant pharma corp needs to make its next million selling something that doesn’t work but comes in a nicer package. The list goes on.”

“Unless this is where you tell me you’re actually a genius scientist

doing secret research for the betterment of mankind, I am out of here."

He stood up from the bench and unzipped the monkey suit, the half-burnt joint in his mouth glowing at the tip. He wore protective leather pants and a motorcycle jacket underneath, both white. Red stripes ran along the jacket's sleeves, matching the stripes on the pants. He packed the monkey suit into his bag.

"And if I am," he said, "would you care to see my secret lab?"

* * *

Victor's motorcycle hummed between her legs with vibrant energy. She justified getting on the bike with a complete stranger by telling herself these were desperate times that called for desperate measures.

At least she no longer had to worry about calling her mother to tell her the news, or her best friend Linda, or even her ex. She could think about them and about her (potentially painful but short) future later. Tonight, she was going to have an adventure.

Sure, she could have refused Victor outright, but she hadn't sensed anything too off about him apart from the obvious quirkiness. She figured that had he been a serial killer or a rapist or some different form of predator, he would've kept a lower profile instead of dressing up like a monkey who rode around on a motorcycle that cost more than most people she knew made in a year.

So, she got with the program.

Irina held onto Victor, her breath condensing on her visor. She was glad he gave her a passenger helmet; Irina wanted them to make it to their destination, wherever *that* was, safe and sound. Victor's face might not have been Boy Band material, but she could feel the lean muscles of his abs through his jacket. It had been too long since the last time Irina had been with a man. Too long. Sex was a basic need, and she was only human.

They rode in silence, her arms wrapped around his waist, until she started to realize where he was bringing her. She let out a sound of surprise that failed to escape the confines of her helmet. Victor parked at the ELTE University building by the Danube River, the one with the observatory on its roof.

"ELTE? I thought we were going to your place," she said. "Don't tell me you're a student."

"Forever a student." He got off the bike and she had little choice but to follow him into the building. Victor flashed a student ID card to the napping security man, dived into a corridor, and started up a

spiral staircase. She struggled to keep up, yet she liked the hurry; the hurry fed her lust. Nevermind her recently failed relationship, the last time she had a good fuck was five years ago. A middle class tragedy, she decided, following Victor through a solitary door at the top of the stairs.

To her delight, a queen-sized bed stood in the center a room that looked like the base of a dome. A fireman's pole next to the bed disappeared into a hole in the ceiling. They took off their shoes so as not to dirty the soft carpets. Bookshelves stood against walls in a circle around them. Irina got it. They were inside the observatory.

"Secret lab?"

"The lab's up there." He pointed up. "This is just the foyer."

After the way he'd ran up those stairs, she felt disappointed when he simply stood by the firepole instead of pouncing on her like a hungry tiger. Irina bit her lip in a habitual motion. Why else would he get her up here, if not for the sex? She took one step closer and put her hands on his wrists, looking into his eyes. Victor was about the same height as her, so it was easy to manage. His eyes held a hint of hidden laughter at the edges. They fit his hawkish face well. It was time to take matters into her own hands.

"Mister Monkey Suit Man," she said, pulling him gently toward the bed, "do you think if maybe we could… maybe, you know… experiment here?" Irina couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth.

He leaned toward her, then took a step back. "Look, you really should see this. Trust me."

"Trust you?"

"Exactly. I want you to see the lab. I've been working on something. Well, my brother and I were working on something, but he isn't here now, is he? No, he isn't. Come. You're going to love this."

Victor wrapped his hands around the pole, locked it between his knees, and climbed up with expert grace.

"I'm not doing that," she said.

He offered her his hand, and pulled her up through the hole in the ceiling.

At least a dozen tables took up most of the floor space in the upper half of the dome. They were buried under clock gears, computer hardware, electronic manuals, books, wrenches, screwdrivers, and other mad scientist-esque clutter. Two chairs sat back to back in the middle of the room.

"Sit," Victor said.

"You've got to be kidding me. What is this?"

"Do you know what the word 'sonder' means, Irina?"

She tensed up. What was she getting herself into?

“No, Victor, what does it mean?”

His mouth formed into an angular smirk. He picked up a book from the table next to him. It was titled The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows. Victor shook the book a little, as if proving a point. “According to this,” he said, “’sonder’ is the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own — populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness — an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you’ll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway or as a lighted window at dusk.”

Irina sat into the chair in front of him. “Nice quote,” she said. “But so what?”

Victor put the book down and, in one impatient motion, flung a tattered notebook from the table, revealing a little chest underneath, its sides decorated in a flowery pattern. He flipped the lid open. The box was filled with blue pill capsules.

“If you really want to know so what, I can show you. I can show you a world very few have ever seen.” He offered her a pill.

“What is this?” She examined the capsule. On its side, the letters UF203 were printed in the tiniest font.

“Remember that place I told you that dimethyltryptamine takes you to? That place where all those anthill passages of human lives intersect? Well, it’s the same principle. Only here, we give your brain a little nudge to construct a reality that had been pre-built for you. It’s the most perfect, seamless virtual reality experience you can imagine.”

“A chemically-induced VR? So, what, I swallow this, and I see a hallucination that you’ve… constructed somehow?”

“No, no, no, it’s not like that. Swallow this, and your mind will be blasted into a different plane, a place at the heart of the world. From there, you can go anywhere you want. See anything you like. Be with anyone you like. It’s the internet for the mind, kind of. Once we both take it, we can meet in a universe I made for such things and continue our conversation there.”

“A pill that designs universes and gives you telepathic powers?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that, but yeah, pretty much,” he said. “Do you trust me?”

I just met you, she thought. She’d never taken psychedelics before; she heard it could be dangerous. But then again, dangerous was relative. Irina had no way of knowing how much time she had left on this Earth, so the only logical thing to do under the circumstances was live while she still could. Irina nodded her consent and swallowed the

capsule.

Victor took a pill as well, then picked up from the floor a pair of expensive-looking headphones connected to a stereo system under the chairs. She hadn't noticed it before. He put the headphones over her ears. Victor sat in the other chair, the back of his head touching Irina's.

"It's not working," Irina said disappointed. From the way he'd described it, she'd expected the pill to have quite an effect. Nothing was happening.

"Wait for it."

Clicking noises played in what seemed like random patterns in her headphones like segmented static. It was a strange sound that grew progressively louder, making her forget everything except the *clicks* and the *clacks* and the *shhhs* in her ears. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she was somewhere else.

* * *

The air smelled of pine trees, crisp, pumping her lungs full of oxygen with every breath she took. *Mountain air*. Victor sat on his knees in front of her, palms on his hips, back straight. He wore a black *gi*. If somebody had asked her yesterday what a *gi* was, she'd have raised an eyebrow and looked at them funny. Now, she had no doubts whatsoever it was the proper Japanese name for Victor's black kimono-style jacket and pants. To her surprise, that wasn't the only thing she knew.

She knew that her body, her real body, sat in a chair in Victor's lab. Somewhere in the confines of her mind, she still had all the memories, worries, fears and insecurities that made her who she was; she knew it, but that knowledge was like a half-developed photograph — forgettable and unimportant. All that mattered was the Now. Irina took in a chestful of air, the rough fabric of her own gi brushing against the skin of her breasts. She had never felt this good in her life.

They sat facing each other on the grass of a traditional Japanese courtyard, surrounded by cherry trees and paper walls. The trees were in full bloom, rose colored petals floating down around them.

Irina instinctively reached out with her mind toward her body, mentally feeling every tense muscle of her organism: her trained biceps, her flat stomach. It was a strange sensation.

"Everything you see around you is a construct," Victor said, "but that doesn't make anything that happens here any less real. Put your hand up."

Irina raised her right arm and held it at chest level, palm up. Victor put his palm over hers. “Remember,” he said, “everything is a question of perspective. You are a *kunoichi* of the Iga clan, trained in the art of deception, hardened in violent combat. Close your eyes. *Remember*.”

She closed her eyes. Images of battle flashed before her in high definition. She stood back to back with Victor, a bloodied katana sword in her hands as samurai warriors came at them from the woods in numbers beyond count.

She was Anger. She was Destruction. She was Death.

But then, she remembered something else. She remembered the taste of Victor’s lips when they’d kissed, the first time they’d sneaked away under the ninja camp’s sentries’ noses to make love under the stars.

She remembered her first orgasm.

Irina gripped Victor’s fingers. It had been too long since she’d last known a man’s touch. She was a *kunoichi*, and she knew what she wanted. More importantly, she knew what to do.

She took a deep breath, tackled Victor to the ground, and pulled the flaps of his gi open. She admired his muscular torso for a split second before she found his lips and slipped her tongue into his mouth. He responded in kind, his taste as sweet as she remembered it. Irina covered his cheeks in kisses before running her tongue down his neck. She licked his nipples until he moaned and shivered with pleasure, then licked his chest, one long motion, straight down across his navel, and lower, crawling back on her knees. Her face hovered over his groin. She pulled the gi pants from his hips. His cock stood erect and hairless.

It was bigger than she’d thought it would be. She ran her tongue over his balls, up the shaft, and swallowed it whole. There was no gag reflex, only the sensation of trembling flesh in her mouth, filling her throat. Victor arched his back and put his hand on her hair — a gentle touch. She slid his cock out of her throat, then in again, and out. Three times: each time Victor’s grip on her hair tightened until his body convulsed as if in shock. Irina came up for air, saliva and Victor’s juices dripping from her mouth.

Patience was not an option; the warm, wet desire between her legs demanded satisfaction. Irina jerked her pants down and mounted Victor’s throbbing cock. As wet as she was, she still gasped when the weight of her body impaled her onto him. She arched her back, adjusting to the new presence inside her — so tight — then she fell toward him, grabbed his neck, locked his lips in a kiss, and rode him like a cowgirl on her last rodeo.

At some point she realized she was about to come. The second the

thought crossed her mind, however, Victor lifted her by the hips and turned her around in one swift motion. Irina let out a frustrated shriek, but before she could turn back, Victor pulled her *gi* jacket halfway off her shoulders and tied the dangling sleeves into a knot, binding her arms behind her. He tried to push her face down to the ground. She let him.

When he entered her from behind, he did so with the gentle caress of an experienced lover. That didn't last long; animal lust took over within seconds. He thrust into her, hips hammering against her buttocks as sounds of pleasure, pain, and pure need escaped her lips every time his dick went all the way inside. He reached out across her right thigh, fingers sliding across her most sensitive parts. The world shrunk down to the area below her stomach and exploded like fireworks against a starless sky.

Countless seconds passed as she lay under him on the soft grass. All strength had left her body.

The air sizzled with electricity. Victor sprang to his feet. There was a cracking sound, and Irina blinked. Six figures dressed in gray *gis* stood in a circle around them, their faces hidden behind masks, the tips of their curved swords raised to Victor's eye level. The ninjas moved around them in slow, deliberate side-steps like a pack of disciplined wolves. Irina's first instinct was to conceal her nakedness. Her second thought, though, told her that with her hands still tied, she had worse problems to worry about.

Victor didn't hesitate. He closed the distance to the ninja coming for her, caught the shoulder of his striking arm in a *hokko* lock and threw the man down in one practiced move. *Hokko* meant *bear*, the technique named after the image of a bear throwing a boulder. The ninja hit the ground next to her, face-first, less like a boulder and more like a sack of shit. Irina wrapped her legs around his neck and twisted. It snapped with a crack. *I've done this before*. Everything had happened in a matter of seconds. When she looked up, Victor was pressing an attack, armed the sword he'd taken from the man she'd just killed. It was five against one, though there was little doubt who dominated the fight. Victor's blade moved in a blur, each cut meeting flesh. Blood sprayed in fountains against his naked body as he sliced through the ninjas. By the time Irina had untangled herself from her *gi's* sleeves, six dead men lay on the ground.

"What… what is this?" she asked, getting up to her feet.

The expression on Victor's face worried her more than the gore covering it; he looked as shocked as she felt. She knew right then that whatever had happened, it was not a part of his design. "Victor? What's going on?"

Night fell on them in a chilling instant; one moment they stood

under a clear cloudless sky, the next, they were surrounded by darkness. The darkness didn't last. The cherry trees around them erupted into flames, illuminating the courtyard with orange light. Macabre shadows danced across the grass.

On some level Irina knew everything around them was an illusion, yet she found little courage in the thought. She pressed her naked back against Victor's. Another endless moment later, wind rushed into the courtyard. The fallen ninjas turned to ash as the wind swept them away. She shielded her eyes.

When she lowered her hand from her face, a man of Victor's height stood a few meters away from them. He wore full samurai armor, with red chitin plates protecting his shoulders, torso, and legs. A black metal mask covered his face, its lips crooked in a grin. She saw his eyes through the eye slits — the unmistakable blue of faded cobalt. *Victor's eyes!* A *nōdachi* was strapped to the man's back, a sword so long it was traditionally used against horsemen rather than infantry. The man unsheathed it.

"You!" Victor shouted, rushing him. He unleashed a fury of blows against the armored samurai, each strike deflected with such ease as if Victor was a toddler with a willow branch. Sparks flew as the blades met over and over again, the samurai's defenses impeccable. Finally, the samurai grew bored of the game. Victor dived in for another strike, the armored man side-stepped, and thrust the sword through Victor's chest, using its length to full advantage. Irina watched as more than eighty centimeters of steel came out of her lover's back. The samurai kicked Victor off the sword. He fell to the ground and remained still.

She backpedalled. The swords that once littered the ground before the demon samurai's entrance had been turned to ash along with their owners, the only remaining katana still in Victor's grasp, too close to the advancing samurai. Irina had nowhere to go. The samurai raised his sword and came at her with a strike of bone-shattering strength. Sharp steel bit into her shoulder.

* * *

Waking up to the real world was sudden and disorientating, yet not at all unwelcome. Irina sat in Victor's observatory, trying to catch her breath. She felt the back of Victor's head against hers. He was panting too.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I… I think so. What the fuck was that?"

"That," he said, his voice bitter, "was my brother."

2
Belgian Chocolate

"Your brother? This is your brother? What the fuck is wrong with him?"

Irina's body continued to tremble with fear, shock, confusion, and pain. She'd never felt razor-sharp metal slice through her flesh before; she hoped, she'd never have to again. Victor's brother had a lot of explaining to do.

Victor stood up, removed the headphones from Irina's neck, and leaned against one of his workbench tables, looking exasperated. He remained like that for a half a minute. "His name's Mark," he finally said. "He's my younger brother. We grew up in an orphanage, he and I. Our parents died when he was seven. I was fourteen. It wasn't good for him. Even then, he didn't like my looking after him. He's like that, very independent. I think he dropped out of uni just to spite me. Even moved to Prague a few years back. He's a genius chemist, you know. The UF203 is his invention. I just helped on the… technical side of things. Found a way to program how your brain perceives reality after his pill jettisons you into the next world using nothing but sound, that sort of thing. Come to think of it, I'm not bad myself."

"Except you're not psychotic, as far as I can tell."

"Mark's not psychotic. He's a big joker that's who he is. He does do an awful deal of psychedelics, most of them of his own design, but he's always been able to keep a lid on it."

"So far."

"Look, I'm sorry about what you went through, but you have to understand… we had to experiment a bit before we got everything to work the way we wanted. There was UF202 and 201 and 200 and… and I don't even want to go into what we tried on ourselves over the past few months. We've never had any issues; when it comes to chemistry, Mark knows his stuff. He was probably just testing some crazy theory."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. What he did to us there you'd call it a 'psi-hack,' I guess. Remember how I told you when you take UF203 you get blasted into a different dimension? Well, it should be possible for a foreign entity to jump in on the action — to psi-hack whatever virtual reality your brain's constructed for you. I bet it's even easier to jump somebody who's sharing their World-Space."

"Sharing a 'World-Space.' Is that what we were doing?" Irina got up. "That was *not* fun, Victor. Not fun at all."

Victor lowered his eyes. “Again, I’m sorry. My brother can be eccentric at times. Runs in the family, I suppose, though you can’t deny that the part before he decided to jump us was at least a little bit fun, can you?”

Irina blushed and said nothing.

Wait, she thought, ‘*Decided to jump us?’* That meant Victor’s little brother sat in his chair somewhere in Prague, sharing this World-Space with them, watching Victor fuck the shit out of her until they were done and only then did he decide to add some ninja action to the mix. It was an uncomfortable thought.

On the one hand, none of it actually happened; she and Victor did not, technically, have sex. By this logic, Mark did not really ambush them; it’d been all in their heads. On the other hand, she’d felt Victor’s touch on her “imaginary” skin as if it had been own. She’d felt his breath, her hands bound by the black *gi*, felt Victor inside her… her head spun. She’d had enough adventures with unstable, drugged-out men for the evening, real or otherwise.

“Can I at least give you a ride home?” Victor asked.

Irina considered what waited for her at home. She and her friend Linda rented a two room apartment close to the arts faculty building, although Linda was rarely there this early in the evening. A relief, but it also meant Irina would be left alone to face the knowledge of her impeding death. Breast cancer wasn’t incurable, yet she wasn’t sure optimism was the right approach. Doctors couldn’t tell her if she had three years or three months to live. There would be tests, of course. Medication. Observation. Chemotherapy. She shrugged, vowing to call her mother in the morning.

“Of course,” she said, “I’d love that. And I’ll have your number while we’re at it.”

Victor smiled.

* * *

She asked Victor to come up, but he kept the motorcycle’s engine running and quoted some pressing business before riding off. *Too bad for him.* As she’d had expected, Linda wasn’t home. Irina left her tennis shoes under the coat stand by the door and raided the kitchen for bread, mayo, chicken and cheese. The way she figured it, she had to live life while it lasted. So, chicken sandwich in hand, she went to her room.

It wasn’t exactly small, but it was more cluttered than it had any right to be. Art books spilled from her bookshelf and onto the bed, sharing it with a half a dozen sketchbooks of half-finished drawings;

notebooks she'd filled with scribbles during class littered the floor, most of them thrown atop discarded clothes. Irina ignored the mess as she sank into the leather IKEA chair by the desk. She closed the window curtain and turned on her laptop.

What she needed was an escape; a magic button she could press to make all the bad things go away; a wizard's wand she could wave and — *abracadabra* — cancer was again something that only happened to others.

Irina gave her bed a critical look as her computer booted up. She'd spent more than a few interesting, sweaty nights with Gabor here… granted, he'd been doing most of the sweating, but their sexual life had had its moments. *He was such a nice guy.* Ex or not, she'd have to tell him about her cancer before it was too late. She owed him at least that much.

Well, she might not have had a magic wand, but at least she still had her art. Irina didn't dare count the hours she'd spent on her latest project; she knew they'd run *way* over a hundred, and spending even more time on what essentially amounted to an elaborate 3D model of Budapest when her life was about to come to an untimely end seemed like a dubious idea. *When you don't know what to do, do what you know.* Irina opened the project and immersed herself into the polygons, vertices, and lighting angles of a meticulously modeled flower shop on the corner of Dohany Street. She would worry about everything else later.

Her mobile rang, startling her, and Irina took the phone out of her jeans pocket. The caller ID was blocked. Who could be calling her past ten? The phone continued to ring. Irina had little to lose, so she slid her thumb across the touchscreen, accepting the call.

"Irina Filidilupi?" said a man's voice. It sounded vaguely familiar, and, to her surprise, he'd even pronounced her Italian surname correctly.

"Is this you, Victor?"

"No, Irina, this isn't Victor. This is Mark."

Fear crept into her heart, past the numbness the news of her terminal illness had left in its wake. Her hands started trembling, just like at Victor's place.

"Mark? Victor's-brother-Mark? How did you get this number?"

He didn't answer.

"Hello?"

"Irina, I've hacked your brain a few hours ago. How hard do you think it was for me to get your telephone number?"

Now there was a scary thought. "What do you want?"

"To talk. We've got to talk."

"We're talking now."

“Not like this. There’s… there’s something I’ve got to tell you about what my brother’s doing. We’ve got to meet.”

“I thought you were in Prague?”

“I am. That shouldn’t be an issue, though. Check your drawer.”

Irina kept coursework and sketches in her drawer. Nothing useful there. And even if there was, how was that anyone’s business but her own. “My drawer? How do you know what’s in my drawer?”

“I don’t. But I know my brother. Check it, please.”

She slid the desk’s top drawer open where inside, waited a little metal case that reminded her of the boxes some coffee shops packed mint candies in. She opened it. Sure enough, it was full of blue capsules with characters “UF203” printed on their sides.

“Did you break into my flat?”

“It’s there, isn’t it? Look, I didn’t break in anywhere. I’m in Prague, remember? My brother, on the other hand… we’ve got to talk. I’m going to send an mp3 file to your phone. Get yourself comfortable, really comfortable, then take one of the pills, put your headphones on, and play the track fifteen minutes from now. We’ll meet.”

“And I’m supposed to trust you?”

“Think of it this way: How worse can things get? I’ll be waiting.” He hung up on her.

If life had taught her anything, it was that things could *always* get worse. What was he talking about? Did Mark know about her illness? Or, for that matter, did Victor know? Was their meeting on Margaret Island truly a coincidence, or had she been played like a schoolgirl? Irina’s response to crisis might’ve been escapism, but at least there was some sort of a perverse comfort in knowing her fate. This… this was something else.

She tried to apply cold reason, locking her fear away to a distant corner of her mind. *I think, therefore I am.*

Fact one: Somebody broke into their apartment. This was more disturbing than any imaginary ninjas Mark could throw at her.

Fact two: A man she’d never met (an arguable point, perhaps) apparently knew that her life wasn’t at its all time high. She hadn’t talked to anyone about her cancer except for the hospital staff, so other people knowing couldn’t have been a good sign.

One thing was for sure: It had been an unusual day, and it wasn’t over yet. She took one of the pills out of the case, spinning it between her thumb and index finger. Her phone vibrated, notifying her of new mail. They — whoever *they* were — knew her full name, telephone number, e-mail address; they knew where she lived, and could apparently come and go as they pleased. And, as a cherry on top, she had terminal cancer, which brought her to…

Fact three: Mark must have known he was right; what *did* she

possibly have to lose?

With the pill squeezed firmly between her fingers, Irina put her phone in one pocket, its earbuds and a lighter in the other, took a couple of candles from the bookshelf and crossed the hall to the shared bathroom.

She opened the tap in the bathtub before placing the candles at the tub's head. Maybe there *was* more to reality than this world alone. Maybe what she'd experienced at Victor's observatory had been more than a custom-designed hallucination, and she'd found her magic escape button after all… or, rather, it found her. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking. Mark's samurai blade had sliced into her all too well, and meeting him in a virtual world again seemed like a crazy idea, though at this point, crazy she could live with. She had to get to the bottom of what was going on, no matter what. Irina took off her clothes and put them on the washing machine, placed her mobile on the clothes pile, connected the earbuds, and stepped into the hot water.

Her phone rang again. It was Victor's number. *Now what?* At the very least, the older brother had the decency to keeps his caller ID open. Irina considered answering, but she didn't want to be late for her "meeting" with Mark. The purely scientific revelation that something lay beyond the world of the physical couldn't have come at a better time. Besides, it was time she'd learnt the other side of the story.

Irina rejected the call, slid the UF203 pill on her tongue and swallowed. She lay down and, relaxing her limbs in the hot bath, put her earbuds in and played the audio file she'd gotten from Mark.

* * *

Click, click, click… click, went the sound, as her fear dissolved in the hot, soothing water. She closed her eyes. *I am a* kunoichi *of the Iga clan, trained in the art of deception,* she told herself. *I am hardened in battle, and I am not afraid.*

When Irina opened her eyes, she'd expected to find herself back in the ninja garden; instead, she stood on a busy square in some distantly familiar-looking European city. Even in a simulated world, walking around naked seemed like a dubious idea, so she was happy to find that she was wearing the same shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes she'd worn to Margaret Island. People in modern clothing passed by on all sides; tourists poured in and out gift shops; a couple of bakeries on opposing streets smelled faintly of fresh bread and pastries. Irina recognized Mark immediately.

He sat on a stone bench in the middle of the square, a ‘SMOKING!’ logo stretched across the chest of his black t-shirt, his face hidden behind a Guy Fawkes mask, the one that *The Watchmen* movie had made into a symbol of civil unrest. Brown dreadlocks fell over his shoulders. A worn leather pouch dangled from his belt.

“Welcome to Belgium,” he said.

“Belgium? Why Belgium?”

“It’s an old prototype Victor made. He discarded it, but I rebuilt it almost from scratch. There’s no way he can get to us in here.”

Locked in with a predator, she thought. *Good job, Irina.*

“You attacked us! You cut me with that sword of yours. It hurt, Mark. It fucking hurt. What the fuck?”

“Walk with me.” He stood and strolled across the square. Irina walked by his side. Mark produced a glass pipe from his pouch, brought it to his mouth, held a burning match to the bowl, and took a long drag. When he exhaled, marijuana smoke drifted to Irina’s face, the smell pleasing, inviting. It was top grade stuff.

“Welcome to my world,” Mark said, passing her the pipe. She took a drag as they left the square for a narrow alley, stopping at a nearby shop where chocolates of all types lay piled behind a display glass; liquid chocolate poured down a chalice-like fountain in the center of the stand. The painted sign over the door read, *Farkas Chocolate.*

“What’s this?”

“This is one of the first places we built. Mark and Victor Farkas, that’s us. We made it in case we wanted to show somebody how deep, like they say, the rabbit hole goes.”

“You’re going to quote *The Matrix* now? Really?”

“You have to admit, there are certain parallels. In that movie, inhuman machines used dreaming humans as batteries, but it’s actually the other way around. The dream world powers our bodies while we’re on the plane of the living… and once our bodies die, that energy retracts into its source and reforms, ready to power another life somewhere else in the universe.”

Victor sure was right about his little brother doing too much psychedelics. “You’re talking about God,” she said.

“God, gods, nature. Like the grass and the sky, it’s just there. So, Irina,” — he opened the door — “*do* you want to find out how deep the rabbit hole goes?”

She entered without hesitation. Inside, the chocolate-filled shelves glittered in rainbows of colorful wrappers, complimenting the shop’s multicolored carpets. A chocolate fountain almost as tall as herself stood in the center of the room.

A tingling sensation ran through her body; the THC had reached

her and she was mildly stoned. At this point, anything could happen. But if Mark had wanted to hurt her, he would have done so already. She'd volunteered for this, and she needed some answers. Irina locked her eyes on the fountain. Chocolate cascaded down the overflowing chalice and into the bowl like a pulsating waterfall. *Chocolatefall.*

Irina decided against wasting time on the scenery. "Mark, what is it you wanted to tell me about Victor? And what's up with the mask?"

Deep down inside, she knew this wasn't why she was here. She knew she was actually lying in her bathtub while her life ticked away. She couldn't care less about brotherly rivalry; what she had here was, as pretentious as it sounded, a shot at immortality. Fate had handed her a second chance, and it was an opportunity she could not miss.

"He wants to kill you," Mark said.

"What?"

"He wants to kill you," he repeated.

"Why? We just met. And wasn't it you who attacked us? Why would he want me dead?"

What if they're both maniacs, she mused through the marijuana haze, *What if Victor is on the way to my apartment right now? What if…*

"It's nothing personal. My brother's a brilliant programmer. A hacker. Your meeting wasn't random, he was searching for someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Somebody young, passionate, but whose life had been doomed before it had a chance to really begin. Somebody desperate. Somebody ill — fatally ill."

"He hacked the hospital records? But why? What does he want with me?"

Mark walked to the chocolate fountain, dipped a finger into the flowing liquid, then licked it clean. "This space beyond space, this plane that connects all living organisms," he said. "When we shape it into tangible reality, the kind we're experiencing now, we call it 'World-Space.' The writer Alan Moore" — he tapped his plastic Guy Fawkes mask — "called it 'Idea-Space.' He had a point. It is a place where ideas — the one true magic — shape into something powered by our imagination and thought alone. But like Ie said, it works both ways. What Victor and I made is dangerous. If too many people start disconnecting from reality, it could be bad, really, really bad. The line would blur and the real world may simply… cease to be. People would start seeing it as data, information; as a different form of one of many possible realities, and nothing more. I cannot let that happen."

"That doesn't sound so bad. Perspective is everything, right?"

"Of course it's bad! Did you hear what I just said? Our reality could collapse! The university doesn't let Victor live on their roof

because they think he's pretty, you know. He's already patented his method of using sound to shape what your brain shows you. It's not going to do him any good, though. I still own the rights to all the chemistry parts. That's why he wants you."

"That's why he wants to kill me?"

"He doesn't want to just kill you. He wants to upload you, if you will, to make you his psychic sentinel, to have a copy of you roaming the World-Spaces. Like an internet bot with a soul."

"Why?"

"Because he knows he'll never get the UF203 formula from me, but with you as an extension of his will into the beyond, he won't need one. The creature he wants to make you into will have access to *all* information, straight from the source. With your help, he will become a god. Your body, of course, would have to be discarded. Hell, knowing him, he'll probably talk you into doing it yourself."

"Whoa, Mark. That sounds heavy. Thing is, I'm dying anyway."

"Everybody dies, some sooner than later. And that's what makes us human. Please understand, you won't be *you* anymore if he has his way. You'll be dead."

"I'll be something bigger."

"No, Irina, you'll be dead. A copy of you will live on, sure, but you'll be dead." He pulled off the mask. Mark's clean-shaven face shared Victor's angular features, but there was no gray in his hair. He looked younger, more rogue-like. His dreads fit him well. "As for the masks… it's a fashion statement. Who I am here is not who I am as a person. I'm not a samurai warrior. I'm not whoever you see now, even though it's how I usually look. Everything you see is a lie."

"A very believable lie."

"As all the best lies are. Look, when you've had… sex with Victor, what did you feel? Was it as good as the real thing?"

"You're a pervert, Mark. What are you, some kind of *voyeur*?"

"It wasn't real! None of this is real!"

Mark dipped two fingers into the chocolate fountain, the liquid parting at his touch. "We made Farkas Chocolate to prove how unreal it all is. This place amplifies your ideas, makes weaving the World-Space around easier. Here, let me prove to you it isn't real; let me prove to you, you're not even who you think you are." Without warning, he shot a jab at her face. Irina's body reacted, muscle memory bypassing thought.

She grabbed Mark's fist before it could connect and she bent his arm up, using her other hand to lock him at the elbow. In one smooth motion she levered his body around, pushed him forward, and dipped his face into the fountain. Chocolate sprayed. Everything had happened in less than three seconds.

With a start, she realized what she'd done was called *karai,* one of the basic moves in the *taijutsu* branch of the secret arts of the ninjas. She vaguely remembered her training in the fresh air of the Iga Mountains, but it was as though it'd happened to someone else, long ago and far away.

"See?" Mark wriggled out of her grasp and turned. Half of his face was covered in chocolate. Irina couldn't suppress a smirk. "See? He's changed you already. Do you think you could've done that if not for what Victor had done to you? He can alter your memories, change what you know, make you into *somebody else* if he wants to. How many people do you think would buy into his idea of the perfect escapism experience, the thrill of a video game, indistinguishable from reality, a world connected to something more than this mortal plane? How many people do you think he'd be able to control?"

Irina stepped forward, sliding one finger across Mark's chocolate-covered cheek.

Cancer or not, she was one lucky girl. Mark proposed she to roll over and die, like the world expected her to. Victor apparently wanted to make her… a *goddess*. It wasn't a hard choice to make. If Mark and Victor could control these World-Spaces, then so could she.

She held her palm against his cheek, looked into his cobalt eyes, and imagined him with a different face.

The chocolate shop amplified her powers of thought, yes, but she hadn't expected it to be *that* easy. The image before her flickered for a second as if somebody had adjusted a TV antenna inside her head, and suddenly she was looking at Gabor, the man she once thought she'd marry, his face covered in chocolate. Gabor, who once said he was "too normal" to be with her. She knew it wasn't him. It was Mark, wearing his face… but she was already past the point of no return.

The way she saw it, if she had no regrets about spending time with Victor, what stopped her from having fun now? After all, according to Mark, everything she saw and felt here was a lie. Couldn't she twist the lie as she pleased?

"Take off your clothes," she said, and turned away from the man with her ex-boyfriend's face. In the real world, she and Gabor had never been too compatible in bed; the last orgasm she'd had in two years was earlier that evening, and whether she'd actually had it or not was open to debate. She found Mark's silence encouraging, hoping he wasn't staring at her back like she was crazy.

If he was half as smart as he claimed, then he must have figured out she'd already chosen her team, and he wasn't on it. But he was also a man, and men were easy. Irina turned to face him. This was her domain.

Mark stood naked by the chocolate fountain, his clothes at his

feet. She took in his muscular legs with a critical gaze. They were flawless. His cock hung limply, slightly curved to the left, and he was shaven, of course. Muscles rippling under the skin of his chest. He looked like a tiger, ready to pounce.

"Gabor," she said.

"Don't talk now."

Irina pulled her shirt over her head and threw it to the floor, edging closer. As soon as her belly pressed against Mark's abs, she felt his fingers on her back, undoing the clasps of her bra. She dipped her right palm into the fountain and pushed away from him.

Mark stared, bedazzled, as Irina rubbed chocolate across her naked breasts, on the top and on the bottom, and a little around her nipples, already so hard that she didn't dare touch them. She rubbed herself slowly, enjoying Mark's bewildered anticipation. *I am a fuckin' queen,* she thought, *and you will act accordingly.*

She drew the last line of chocolate under her navel. Mark closed the distance, grabbed her by the waist and slid his tongue down her collarbone. He pushed her up against a shelf, and chocolates fell to the carpet like candy fireworks while Mark continued to lick her skin, each caress of his tongue moving closer and closer to the tips of her breasts, his whole face now covered in chocolate.

He placed his lips around her nipple. Irina let out a moan. All thought dissolved as his tongue ran down to her navel, leaving only sweet pleasure behind, then lower still. When he reached the edge of her jeans, when no more chocolate was left and Irina's trembling knees made it difficult to stand, he unzipped her jeans and pulled them down to the floor along, with her panties.

Irina laid her hands on his head as he slid his tongue across her wet sex, licked around it, and then slowly nudged his tongue up into her. She bent her knees and Mark pushed against the inside of her thighs, spreading them wider. Irina bent her back.

Her body shook from the knees up, but she would have him on her own terms. Irina pushed Mark, and he fell backwards onto the wrapped chocolates on the carpeted floor.

Veins bulged in his erect cock. Irina mounted him, too wet to do anything else; she slid onto him, at first only a little, and then all the way down. It was tight, very tight. But Irina was so wet, so *hot* down there that it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but him inside of her; nothing but her movement, sliding up and down, controlling the pressure, down and up, his hands on her waist, on her breasts; down and up… at some point she'd fallen onto his chest and pressed against him, his cock thrusting, every move an attempt to penetrate deeper.

Gabor, she thought to the universe, reaching out with her mind to a point in the ceiling where she imagined her ex-boyfriend sleeping in

his bed, watching quiet dreams. Tonight, she'd give him a dream to remember. *Gabor, this is for you.*

Irina wrapped her arms around Mark's shoulders, and felt his hands lock behind her. He increased the pace. She bit into his skin as he went faster, and faster, and faster. His thighs slapped against hers with a fleshy *whack-whack-whack-whack* as he thrust himself inside, over and over and over again. She started to convulse, but before she could come, he slid out of her and helped her up, turned her around, and bent her over the fountain. *This is supposed to be my show,* she thought faintly, but made no attempt to resist.

Warm chocolate washed her breasts and her face as she gripped the fountain's edge. Mark's fingers spread her buttocks, and she felt the tip of his cock press higher, press in from behind… yet she did not protest. He was so wet, he eased right in. Slowly, deliberately, every centimeter a test stretching her wide, until she realized he was all the way in her ass. Her toes curled.

Mark slid out a little, just as slowly, and then back in again. It hurt only a bit — a bearable bit. His fingers found her clit as he pumped in and out of her, their movements a primordial dance of flesh inside flesh. He pulled her head up by her hair and she stopped gritting her teeth, allowing quiet screams to escape as he ravaged her from behind. All worlds known and unknown existed only at the points where their bodies touched. Irina was ecstatic. Her knuckles tightened.

Whack-whack-whack, their bodies sung, skin against skin. Irina let go of everything and screamed — screamed as loudly as she could as he took her over and over again.

When Irina was on the verge of fainting, Mark pulled out and brought her to her knees. She barely had time to open her mouth as he thrust himself between her parted lips. She didn't gag as he pushed himself deeper; not even when hot sperm shot down her throat, tasting of milk and honey. She swallowed most of it, but some spilled from her mouth trickled down her chin and onto her breasts. *If only real life would be like this… then that'd be fucking gross…* was all that her brain could muster.

Irina sat back against the fountain and closed her eyes. Mark was a man, and men were *easy*. Mark had the formula for UF203, Victor had the means to make things happen. She knew what she had to do.

This, she thought, *is going to be interesting,* and decided that the call to her mom could wait. Tomorrow, she would ask Victor for a job.

The floor turned into a sea of chocolate, and swallowed her into its sweet embrace.

3
Heavy Gear

Irina dreamt of a gentle breeze blowing through a meadow, pine trees casting a pleasant shade in the afternoon sun. She'd never known she could feel so at peace.

She thrust her arm out, blocking an imaginary strike, and planted her feet firmly into the grass.

Irina imagined herself becoming a rock; she was Earth, the first element of the five *godai* of *ninpo*; a rock that dissolved into Water, flowing away from any danger that might come at her from the side. She flowed into an attack position — "Ha!" — and struck a tree with her fist, cracking the bark with a dull thud. She was Fire; she jumped away as if carried by a gust of Wind, and blended into the shadows. Void. *I am nothing.* Ninjutsu told her that ninjas did not live to win… ninjas lived to survive.

I am a kunoichi *of the Iga clan and I am not afraid.*

She woke in a cold sweat. Morning light seeped into the room through the closed curtains, and Irina got up, the dream cemented in her mind. *He can alter your memories, make you into somebody else,* Mark had said. Was she being turned into someone else? Would she even be able to tell? She couldn't worry about that now. She had a plan, and that plan had to work.

Irina took a shower, had toast for breakfast (Linda was nowhere in sight), fired up the 3D model of Budapest on her laptop, and dialed Victor's number.

"Irina? Arrgh… What time is it?"

"You sound like a pirate. It's seven. Rise and shine, lover boy."

"Is everything all right? I called you yesterday, but you didn't pick up."

"What did you want to say?"

"Just wanted to make sure you're all right. You seemed a bit shaken up."

"Yeah, about that. I was busy talking with Mark." *Please don't ask about the details*, she thought.

"Mark? Whoa! You want to tell me the details?"

"He said you want to kill me."

"What? No! Look, that's the crazy talking. He'll be all right in a few days. Come on. Why'd he even say something like that?"

"He said you want to turn me into a superhuman internet bot with a soul."

"For all his smarts, he can be pretty goddamned stupid. There's…

there's something I'm working on, sure, but I don't want to go into it over the phone."

"Oh? Afraid of spies? Does your plan involve me becoming… does it involve me being reborn as a computer program?"

"Not a computer program. This thing we're tapping into, whatever it is, it's not a computer. Not how you'd imagine a human computer, at any rate."

"But that's basically what you want to do to me?"

"It's not that simple.…"

"Does it involve me dying?"

"No! Not at all! I don't know where he got that from!"

"So, can you do it?"

"Again, it's… It's not that simple. I'm just the tech guy, remember? Even if it was possible, we'd need Mark's help. I can't do it without him."

"He said you wanted to get his UF203 patents. He said that if I'll help you, you won't need them anymore. He said people are going to become addicted if you start mass-producing this thing.…"

"It's completely harmless! And it's not addictive! And anyway, I'd never be able to do this without Mark, and he's being a paranoid fool. He thinks if everybody starts creating their own World-Spaces straight from the source, reality might collapse in on itself!"

"Something about blurring the line…"

"Rubbish! Reality isn't some sort of a card-house that falls apart if you blow on it hard enough. It's a mathematical construct. All we did is follow the math."

"How do you mean?"

"It's complicated."

"Try me."

"Hmm… okay. Ever heard of the Fibonacci numbers?"

"Yeah, something about a mathematical sequence occurring in nature, in seashells and whatnot."

"Not just in seashells — everywhere! For example, the bones in your body are proportioned based on this sequence. It arranges leaves on tree stems, seeds in sunflowers, that sort of thing. It's the keycode to our mathematical universe and what Mark based his UF203 work on. Reality is hard math, and math doesn't simply disappear when too many people start using it. This world isn't going anywhere."

"Okay, I want in. I want to do this. I agree, I sign my consent, whatever. Upload me."

He chuckled into his mouthpiece. "Upload you? You think you say 'Beam Me Up, Scotty,' I snap my fingers, and you're be reborn as pure information, with every little part of you still in the places they're supposed to be?"

“Can you do it or not?”

Victor sighed. “No. Not without Mark. I could try, but it’d be better if I didn’t.”

“And my body? What would happen to my body?”

“Nothing. You’ll still be here, you’ll still be you. The other you, however, the other you will have a different fate.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Like I said, it’s not that easy.”

“I think I know a way.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. A contest. I propose a contest.”

“What are you talking about?”

“A contest,” she said. “If you win, Mark gives you his UF203 patents and helps you copy me into this… information stream. If he wins, you forget about making your invention public. If I I win… well, if I win, then Mark helps you copy me as well, and I’ll help you however I can.”

“What? This isn’t a game!”

“It sure felt like one the last time I tried.”

“Well, it’s not. And besides, Mark’ll never agree to such terms. I win, he loses, you win, he loses, he’d be a fool to play.”

“I think he’d see it as a chance to prove that he knows better.”

The phone went silent for a few seconds, then: “You might be right. You might be right. This might actually work. What kind of contest do you have in mind?”

“First, I want you to hire me.”

“We only met yesterday, and I like you already. Did I hear you right? You want me to hire you?”

“Yeah.”

“What in the hell for?”

Irina switched to a bird’s-eye view of the city on her monitor. It was an impressive piece of work. Sometimes, she amazed even herself. “To build worlds for you,” she said.

“What makes you think I can’t manage on my own?”

“Please. That World-Space you showed me when Mark jumped us was nothing but a courtyard, one-room big. You say what we see in a World-Space is based on what your click-making sound file plays, right?”

“I guess you could put it that way.”

“I’m a 3D modeler, Victor. I can build you a map. You’ll convert it to sound, we’ll take the pills, put the clicking on, and *voilà,* we’re practically partners. Besides, if you win, I’ll be working for you anyway. Wouldn’t be right if we don’t put a contract in place.”

“You want me to hire you?”

"Yes."

"To build worlds for me?"

"Yes."

"And you think this thing with Mark, with the patents on UF203… you think it'll really work?"

"Unless he wins, yes!"

"He won't. Can I pick you up in an hour? It's best we talk here."

"I'll be at my place," she said, and hung up.

Irina knew only one way to immortality: art. If her plan worked, a copy of her would live on in a different world. It wouldn't *be* her, but it would be the next best thing.

It would be the best model she'd ever make.

And if she had to die in this world, then so be it.

Everybody dies.

Irina copied her Budapest project to a memory stick. Her mother had taught her to do the best she could, no matter what the circumstances, and she'd taught her well. A twenty-three year old nobody, given a chance at an immortal legacy the likes of which the world had never seen? Irina shuddered. She'd give birth to a new species: a transhuman, the first of its kind. Irina took out an old lace from her bottom drawer. Her mom had once called it "her lucky lace," and she'd kept it ever since. She threaded the lace through the memory stick's loop, then tied it around her neck.

* * *

Victor climbed up the fireman's pole, offered Irina his hand, and pulled her up. The observatory's dome was open, and summer winds blew in from the direction of the Danube River. Irina walked to where the dome parted, taking in the morning sun. *This had better work.*

"I called Mark," Victor said. "He won't do it."

"What? What do you mean, he won't do it?"

"I told you, my brother's not that stupid. It'd take weeks for me to train you to be on par with us. He says we'd plan some way to cheat while we're at it. He won't do it."

"That's his only concern? That we'd cheat? God, you two *are* easy. Let me talk to him."

"What for?"

"Just call him."

Victor took out his phone, dialed a number, and handed it to her. Mark picked up on the second ring.

"Yes?"

"Hi, Mark. It's me. No training. We do this now."

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You think you’ll have a chance at us if you don’t learn the controls, so to speak? You’re much more than your physical body in there; it takes time to master the perspective that gives you. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“No training. You said we’d cheat. We won’t cheat. We do this now. Right now.”

He hung up.

“Are you insane?” Victor said.

“Look, it doesn’t matter if I lose. All that matters is you win. You win, I get what I want — I get a legacy, man. Go me. And fuck Mark’s conservatism. I live for art.”

“You live for art?”

“Yes… Victor, can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Did you know I was sick?”

He didn’t reply.

“Vic, did you know I was sick?”

“Yeah, I knew.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What does it matter?”

“I’m asking, so you’d better think it does.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was looking for a guinea pig. I wanted you to see everything for yourself.”

“Guinea pig, huh?” She smiled. “Oink, oink.”

“That’s Porky Pig.”

“That’s the only pig you’re going to get, and I heard you’ve got a job opening.”

“Right. You’re a straight-to-business kind of girl, I see. Heh.” He nodded at a cluttered workbench. “I have the paperwork. Just sign, and you’re officially working for Dreamweb LLC.”

“Dreamweb LLC?”

“It was a short notice… there was a computer adventure game by the same name in the nineties; I thought the title fitting. Hope they’re not gonna sue.”

“And you did all this in an hour?”

“I know computers.”

Irina went to the workbench, looked through the contract, and found it without flaw. The salary alone was ten times the university stipend. The position? “Designer.” She made a mental note of the hefty life insurance sum Vic’s company offered in case of an employees’ death (no matter what the circumstances), and smiled. It seemed like he really did want her help. After she’d finished reading, she signed it, untied the lace from around her neck, and gave Victor the USB stick.

“That video game,” she asked, “did it have a happy ending?”

Victor took out a box of UF203 pills. He looked serious for a while. “Not really.”

* * *

Irina’s awe knew no bounds. She stood on the Moritz Zsigmond square by the stairs leading to the underpass across the busy road. The square itself was infinitely more detailed than the 3D model Victor had used for reference — cars drove on the road, people stood in little groups near a grocery shop next to them, a pair of would-be passengers ran to catch a departing tram… It was all indistinguishable from the real thing.

And why wouldn’t it? Victor had used their memories to shape this World-Space, and where memory had failed, he substituted it with their imaginations. None of that one-room inner courtyard crap here; the entire city was at their disposal.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“He’ll come.”

“You think it’ll be a sword fight? He seemed into the whole samurai thing.”

“Or a gunfight. He was into the cowboy thing too.”

“Oh.”

“Keep in mind, this is a truel. We’ll all be fighting against one another. The last man standing wins.”

“Or woman.”

“Or woman. But don’t expect any help from me. I’ll take you down first, so you don’t stab me in the back as I’m fighting Mark. Him thinking he knows better than me, that insolent pup.”

“What? You’ll get rid of me first? Shouldn’t we team up?”

“No.”

“No? Hey, if you want to be the number one macho, please, feel free to kill me after we take Mark on, not before!”

“Kill you?”

“Judging by last time, somehow I don’t think this will be a game of chess; I’m sure Mark has something bloody in mind. So yeah, we take him down, you kill me, you win, I win — I win, job well done.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“The two of you talked. God only knows what ideas he put in your head. For all I know, maybe you two teamed up. He *really* wants me to stop working on this project. He’s like a man obsessed.”

“Trust issues, I see.”

“It’s called being careful.”

“It’s called…”

The ground rumbled and shook. The grocery shop’s windows shattered, glass shards flying onto the sidewalk. The tremors swept underneath Irina, and she stumbled toward Victor. She grabbed his hand for support.

A deep hum came from above, and Irina raised her eyes in time to see three blazing balls of fire falling from the sky. She blinked, and the fireballs hit the pavement, smothering the square in thick clouds of dust, smoke, and chipped asphalt blown free from the impact. The earthquake stopped. Irina rose to one knee. Victor sat up.

“You okay?” he asked.

When the dust had cleared, a walking tank stood on the twisted remains of a Budapest city tram, two legs as thick as Hummer jeeps, armored plates colored in urban camouflage. Its weight had crushed the tram like a potato.

The tank’s tower bent down at an angle, and Irina could see the open hatch on the top. Two weapon-bearing arms protruded from the tower’s sides; a machine gun with a barrel as wide as her head was mounted on one of the arms, and on the other sat what looked like an enormous missile launcher. A belt of missiles hung from the machine’s mechanized elbow.

She looked to her right, watching Victor get up from the ground. Another walking tank stood on the roof of a squashed burger stand behind him, this one smaller than the first, but with a cannon half the length of its body for one of its arms. An empty glass cockpit crowned its torso, offering the pilot a three-hundred-sixty degree view of the battlefield.

The third tank was of medium size, with a torso armored in plates of fused metals. Its legs bent backwards at the knees, giving it the overall appearance of a giant, tailless velociraptor armed for vehicular warfare.

Mark walked out of the underpass and joined them by the grocery store. Irina looked around. Not a soul in sight — automobiles sat abandoned on the road; the recently busy streets, empty of people. A tense silence hung in the air. Mark nodded to them and headed for the biggest tank, climbed up the ladder on its leg and, without uttering a word, lowered himself into the hatch.

“EACH OF US TURNS AND WALKS IN A STRAIGHT LINE FOR TWENTY MINUTES,” Mark’s voice boomed from his tank’s speakers, so loudly it made Irina’s ears ring. “THEN, WE BEGIN. LAST MAN STANDING WINS.”

Right, she thought, *the rules of engagement: shoot the other guy first. I can do this.*

Victor climbed into the tank with the freakishly long cannon and closed the glass cockpit over his head. For a few seconds, Irina watched him check his control panels, then turned to face the tank the brothers had left her.

Iron bars were fused to the velociraptor robot's leg as an improvised ladder. Its entrance was in its side, two meters above ground. Irina climbed up, trying not to look down, and pushed through the open hatch.

She landed into a leather chair. The hatch slid closed. The only light in the cockpit emanated from the four screens in front of her. A Colt 1911 pistol was holstered next to the pilot's chair.

The screen in the center glowed with the image of Victor's walking tank directly ahead. The other three showed the view from the back camera and from each of the sides; switches, tumblers, gauges and indicator lamps of all shapes and sizes ran along the walls. Irina fastened her seatbelt and wrapped her fingers around the control joystick. She closed her eyes. She had to learn how to control this thing, and she had to learn fast.

Remember, she thought, *I need to remember.*

Another woman's past flooded her mind. *It worked.* Her name was Lieutenant Irina Filidilupi and her squad swore that she was the most talented pilot to serve in the 1st Mechanized Corps Division. One of the jokers even dubbed her squad "Heavy Gear" because they were "deadly like heroin." Irina took their word for it.

Images from her last battle flickered before her eyes.

Her hull was breached, her tank's left weapon arm was reduced to a smoking stump, her minigun ammo belts hung empty at the machine's sides. Her left leg had been immobilized and she had to use her jet thrusters to haul the tank to safety. And now here she was, none the wiser, ready to fight through another day.

Irina flipped the tumblers responsible for the heat sinks and activated the reactor. The walls vibrated with invisible might.

"Reactor online," said the voice interface in the tone of a polite hostess. "Motion motors online. Weapon systems online."

A beam of energy exploded from Victor's main weapon, and a transparent shield sprung up in a blue half-dome before Irina's tank, absorbing the damage, but the force of the shot sent the multi-ton vehicle sliding backwards onto the road. She hit a parked car, flipping it across the asphalt, and skid to a stop.

"What happened to 'walk for twenty minutes in the other direction?'" she shouted.

Victor's secondary weapon went *bam, bam, bam* as the anti-armor rifle hurled bullets the size of walnuts at her waning energy shield. Each time a shot connected, it pushed her further down the road,

throwing her aim, shattering any hope for a proper firing solution. So she did the only thing she could: she fired blind.

The miniguns on her tank's arms spun to life with a high pitched whistle as twin rays of fire and metal cut into the buildings around them. Even through inches of reinforced steel, Irina could hear her guns roar.

Apartment blocks folded on themselves as the miniguns made short work of the walls; a balcony, cut off from the building over the grocery store, crashed to the ground; something exploded. Some of her shots must have hit the target, because Victor's tank shimmered blue, its shield deflecting the damage. She only had to hold him off until Mark got here in that heavy tank of his. It wasn't impossible.

Victor fired. The beam shattered her energy shield and caught the tank in the torso. The seatbelt cut into Irina's chest as the blast sent her spinning into a nearby house block. A part of the house collapsed into rubble. "Shields down," said the interface.

"Shut up." She routed all power to her thrusters and turned the throttle to the max. The tank glided into the air on burning streaks of flame, setting the half-destroyed building behind it ablaze. Irina hoped she had enough fuel to jump to the other side of the street to use it for cover. She needed to get off this road.

The third shot from Victor's heavy energy rifle caught her mid-flight.

Everything flipped. Irina was falling.

The impact rattled the cockpit. Sparks flew in her face from the broken panels. The screens flickered with static, and it smelled like burnt wires. Irina was so disorientated that it took her a couple of seconds to realize that she hung upside down, her weight pressed hard against the seatbelts.

The vanity on him, she thought. Victor never, not for a second, considered the possibility of losing the truel.

Irina was getting sick of being pushed around. He had manipulated her from the very beginning and now he had put her out of the fight to make sure that she lived up to her side of the bargain. Except that if Mark won, they were both fucked.

Vic should've listened to her. Mark kicked his ass the first time she saw the two brothers meet, what made him think that he wouldn't kick ass now?

Irina assessed the damage. The right leg's pressure gauge cracked and a couple indicator lamps were lost in the impact, but otherwise the cockpit was in working condition. "Run repairs," she told the interface. The snow crashed screens turned black, and came back to life with shaky images from the tank's camera feeds.

Her hull had a gaping hole torn through the side, and her right

weapon arm refused to respond to commands. In more positive news, she still had a third of her jet fuel left in the tank. She thought that if she wouldn't have been so damn lucky, the cockpit could've smelled a lot worse than burnt wiring.

She was still alive, and that meant that Victor was otherwise engaged. *This is a party I can't afford to miss.* Irina grabbed the joystick with her right hand, the jet throttle with her left, and prepared to do something stupid.

The thrust threw the walking tank back on its velociraptor-like feet. Irina held the throttle in place, rising higher. Fuel was at twenty percent. A feeling of weightlessness fell on her as she rose into the air. She could see into the square, where Victor dodged Mark's devastating missile launches one after the other. She landed on a roof overseeing the square and waited. There was no margin for error; she had to time this flawlessly.

Victor used his jet thrusters to get around Mark's tank and kicked a sedan car with his three-ton mechanized leg. The car flew into the air, heading for the back of Mark's colossal tank, when Victor put a round from his semi-automatic into the car. It exploded into a fireball, engulfing Mark in flaming debris. Blue fire shot out of Victor's thrusters, and his small tank torpedoed Mark's in the back like a wrecking ball. Both vehicles collapsed on one another, bringing three houses down with them.

This is my chance, there might not be another. Irina gave the thrusters everything she had.

She hovered over the battlefield. Fuel was at ten percent. She didn't have enough to make it all the way to the two fallen tanks. But then, she didn't need to make it all the way. Irina adjusted the angle on the thrusters and burnt through the remaining fuel, aiming her tank's feet at Victor's glass cockpit.

The tank's right leg smashed through the reinforced glass, its weight multiplied by inertia gained from the thrusters. Everything shook as metal crushed into glass and the flesh beneath it. Irina let go of the joystick and held onto the seatbelt as her tank toppled over. The display screens died, then the indicators, then every other light in the cockpit. The external microphones hummed with the sound of her fallen enemies' engines.

Irina felt the darkness for the pilot's sidearm. It was still there.

"IRINA?" said Mark through his tank's speakers, "IRINA, IS HE DEAD?"

"I don't know."

"I CAN NOT HEAR YOU. THANKS, BY THE WAY. BUT I DIDN'T NEED SAVING."

She switched her microphone on. "What now? We duke it out?"

“NO. THIS IS OVER. YOU HAVE TO CHECK ON VICTOR, THOUGH.”

“If he’s alive, he can hear us.”

“THE WAY THAT WENT, I DON’T THINK HE’D WANT TO BE.”

She unholstered the pistol and opened the hatch. Her tank lay on its side, making getting out as easy as stepping out onto the rubble. The two fallen vehicles lay nearby. A fresh paint of dark red, with a hint of entrails, covered the sides of Victor’s broken cockpit. Mark’s tank lay unmoving beside it. Irina climbed up to the older brother’s cockpit and balanced herself on the armored torso, slippery with his blood.

Everything below Victor’s waist was simply gone. His wrists were gone also, crushed by the weight of Irina’s tank when she’d landed. Victor twitched, trapped in the pilot’s chair, blood trickling down his mouth. He was very much alive. A metal rod stuck out of his throat, and he made gurgling noises every time he opened his mouth.

“This is why they call us, ‘Heavy Gear,’” she told him quietly.

“Hey Mark,” she said, “He looks all right. Says he wants to fight you mano-a-mano, with a sword.”

“Oh yeah? Why doesn’t he say so himself?”

Irina looked at Victor. He looked back, silent agony in his eyes. “I don’t know, he just told me to tell you. Go figure with you crazy genius types.”

She aimed the Colt 1911 at Mark’s tank and counted down seconds. When she reached twenty seven, the armored hatch opened, and Mark showed his dreadlocked head out of the tank. Irina put a bullet right between his eyes. He twitched, brains splattering against the urban camouflage hull, and fell back into the hatch. Irina turned to Victor.

“Always bring a gun to a tank fight,” she said. She faced away and shot him in the head. Warm liquid sprayed her in the cheek. She wiped it off with her t-shirt, and jumped back onto the street, gun in hand.

The skies turned to a shade of dark orange as the sun set over the destroyed city.

Life and death at a twitch of a finger, she thought, raising the gun to her temple. *It’s as easy as pressing a switch. Click, and you no longer exist. And in the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t even matter… not to me. That’s not going to happen to me.*

Irina pulled the trigger.

* * *

The shock of virtual suicide perpetuated everything Victor and Mark did to her brain after she'd won the truel.

She knew they'd copied her mind to a separate World-Space, but she had only a vague recollection of it actually happening. She remembered fragments, burning flashes, a sensation of a thousand spiders digging her brain for knowledge that she didn't know she'd had, glimpses of her past and fragments of her possible futures. But most of all, she remembered the cold barrel of the Colt 1911 pressed against her temple, her finger resting on the trigger. How easy it was for her to pull it. *Too easy*.

Irina threw her head back onto the pillow and looked at her phone. Gabor left a message, but she didn't want to check it. He hadn't written to her in a week and now wasn't a good time to start. What she needed was sleep, not texting. Besides, he'd be the first to recommend utilizing reason, trusting medical science, doing whatever the doctors said. He wouldn't understand that she had found a better way.

Maybe she didn't need to tell him. Maybe she didn't need to tell her mom, either, or any of them. Maybe someone else could do it for her. She palmed the USB memory stick on her neck. The brothers had told her that if she wanted to talk to her copy, she'd find her in the World-Space they'd left in the mp3 file on her memory stick.

"Is she trapped there?" she'd asked Mark.

"She can't be trapped. She's not human, she's… she's sentient information, able to travel through any kind of data you can imagine and reshape it as she sees fit. Please understand, she's nothing like you… but if you go to this World-Space, she will find you."

"She's you," Victor added, "but she's a different you."

A different me, she thought, lying in her bed.

Her life might have not amounted to much in her twenty three years of age, but her legacy would live on to shape worlds forever. Mark had it right: if the virtual Irina decided to help Vic, his technology would spread through the world like wildfire. Who wouldn't want access to a perfect virtual reality at the cost of a pill and a sound file?

There was only one thing left to do: she had to meet The Copy. Irina transferred the mp3 from the memory stick to her phone. Her hands trembled as she carried three candles into the bathroom and filled up the tub.

Irina got in, relaxing in the hot water. She used a box cutter knife to slash open the veins on her left wrist in one determined movement as clicking noises played in her headphones.

The water turned red.

It barely hurt.

* * *

She stood behind The Copy on the deck of a futuristic catamaran as they sailed into a canal of organic rock, its sharp edges contrasted against a star-filled sky.

The triangle sail snapped and retracted into the deck. The Copy was naked, and so was she. The woman looked identical to her from the back, her red hair highlighted in the alien light that danced across the waves.

"Hi," Irina said.

The Copy turned, her eyes wary. She took a step forward on the unsteady deck, breasts pale in the soft glow of the extraterrestrial evening. "Hi."

"You look great."

"So do you."

"So tell me, how do you like being a goddess?"

"I guess I owe you thanks."

"I guess you do."

"I called the paramedics, you know."

"You can do that? Wow!"

"I can do many things."

"They won't get here in time."

"I know."

"Very much like me to call them anyway."

"You're too determined to die."

"I *was* too determined to die, clone. Now it's done."

"You're not dead yet, Irina. Didn't you consider treatment? Doing everything you can to survive? If you didn't want to do it for yourself, wht about doing it for your family, your friends?"

"So you're the one to tell me what's right and what's wrong now, are you? Besides, you know damn well what I thought."

"I've… I've thought a lot more about it."

"You've thought *a lot more* about it? We've just met."

"Time is a relative concept. But to give you a hint, *I think faster.*"

"Oh yeah? What else can you do?"

"Changing the subject? How very much *me* of you."

"Come on, clone, indulge me."

"Stop calling me that. Anyway, all those World-Spaces you've seen? That's nothing. I have access to what's behind it all, the place where dreams are made, where the rules of reality are forged into being. It's… it's really something, you know. I wish I could show you."

"Can't you?"

"No… it'll fry your brain."

"So that's why Victor wanted us."

“Yeah. Good job taking care of that, by the way. It was a nice shot.”

“The pleasure’s all mine. But I take it you’re going to help him anyway? You’d want more people in the dreamweb?”

“Victor didn’t just help you make me. He *made* you make me. Him and Mark, working together. How’d you think that box of UF203 got into your drawer at home in the first place?”

“What box?”

“How’d you first talk to Mark?”

“I… em… he called me?”

“Exactly. You don’t remember. They purged it from your memory. But I remember. And I *know*. Dreamweb LLC… fuck Dreamweb LLC. Fuck Victor. Fuck Mark. You think I don’t know why you are here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your mother taught you to be independent and you pushed her away. Got together with Gabor, except that you weren’t *normal* enough for him. You just wanted to be like everybody else, but I guess I… I guess you’ve just never loved anyone but yourself. The same applies to me by proxy, I suppose. This is why you’re lying in your bathtub with your veins slit open, dying and alone. What did you use? A box cutter?”

“A box cutter. And I am not alone.”

“No. I guess you’re not. You’re sharing this catamaran with a digital copy of yourself.”

“I was dying anyway, haven’t you heard? So, clone, will you do it? Tell everyone that I’m not really gone, I mean?”

“I am not a clone. And I will. It will be like they’ve never lost you. They’ll have me instead, and I’m you, only better.”

Irina smiled. “Is that right?”

Her copy took another step forward and put her hand on Irina’s waist. Her palm felt warm. “That’s right,” she slid her fingers down Irina’s hip and put them between Irina’s legs, groping her ever so gently. Her breath tickled Irina’s ear.

A pterodactyl descended from the skies, breaking the silence with a scream, and headed back towards the stars. “That’s right,” her copy repeated, “This is what you wanted.”

“This is what you wanted,” Irina replied, and pushed the woman who claimed to be her better to the catamaran’s floor.

Their lips connected in a kiss, tongues intertwined in knowing motions. Irina kissed her lips, neck, breasts, sliding her tongue around the nipples until she could no longer resist and put them in her mouth, sucking, nibbling on the pink flesh. Her impossible lover arched her head, spreading her knees apart with a moan. Irina switched position and sat on her lover’s face.

The Copy's tongue slid inside her, around her, the wet, precise motions making her shudder with desire. She held onto the Copy's knees and lowered her head to return the favor.

They held onto each other, body pressed against body, convulsing in pleasure. Waves rose higher, rocking the catamaran on their crests. Water splashed against the deck and showered them in cold drops. Irina would have what she'd wanted now or everything was for nothing. The Copy opened up a cache by their side and pulled out a double dildo. *Pink silicone.* Her digital self gave it to her with a smile.

Irina slid one end inside herself, the silicon spreading her wider, and thrust the Copy's legs apart. She sat closer, pushing the other side into her in one continuous motion, pushing it as deep as it would go.

They pushed; they pulled; they slid; they thrust; one moment their movements were slow and purposeful, the next — impatient, filled with animal lust that even Irina wasn't sure she'd be able to satisfy. Their thighs slapped to a rhythm, and then to no rhythm at all, the flexible silicon buried deeper with each thrust they'd made. Irina grabbed her lover by the ankles and impaled her further yet.

Irina's orgasm rolled inside her like a wave, sharpening her senses to a *tanto* blade's edge. She felt water drops landing on her skin, dissolving into streams of sweat running down her body. She felt the dildo hard inside her, felt her partner's mad desire through the skin of her shaking body. Irina arched her back, hardening her grip on her lover's ankles, and screamed to the stars as she lost control of her body.

An eternity later, Irina closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she was somewhere else.

Part II

Faith without deeds is dead.

James 2:14-26

4
Bad Wings

Linda stood in front of Victor's Big Boss oak desk, fingers wrapped around a ballpoint pen, neck muscles bulging with tension. Victor knew she was right, and he didn't have the stomach to look her in the eyes. Instead, he concentrated on her cleavage.

"Hope for the best, prepare for the worst," she said. "What if the world really is disappearing?"

She had nice cleavage. Ever since Linda had joined Dreamweb LLC at Irina's behest, the three of them had enjoyed a passionate, surreal romance, both in the real world and elsewhere. Now, he shook his head. "That's my brother's saying, Linda. Conspiring with the enemy, are we?"

He rotated his leather chair one hundred eighty degrees to face the smartglass wall of his office. He could barely make out the towers of the Hungarian Parliament across the Danube River below. *How long has it been since it all turned to shit?* he thought.

"Victor…"

He turned his chair back around. "This is not the government's business; it's an internal affair, and that's exactly how we are going to treat it. Besides, if the world was disappearing, don't you think somebody else would've noticed besides my paranoid brother's team of misfits in Prague?"

"Even if they'd known what to look for, they wouldn't know how. An average user's psyche overloads the web. It's the truth." Linda looked over Victor's shoulder, and her expression changed to mild amusement.

Again he turned to the smartglass. The birds-eye view of the city faded, and the projection of an endless white space with no walls or roof appeared in its stead. There, Irina sat on the floor in a lotus position, a laptop on her crossed thighs. She was completely naked apart from her shoelace necklace that terminated in a black memory stick resting above her ripe breasts, pink nipples contrasted against pale skin. Irina's green eyes were darker, deeper, different from how Victor imagined them on those rare occasions he remembered her as the young woman he'd met on Margaret Island two years ago.

Irina closed the laptop. "You don't really believe what she's saying, do you?"

Victor clenched his teeth. They'd played this game before. "Hello, Irina."

"The world is not disappearing."

“But Mark made a study in Prague—” Linda began.

“Ah, yes, a study in Prague.” Irina stood and walked up to the simulated window that separated their worlds. She liked her body for a reason; Victor’s blood pressure rose.

“Lunacy,” she said. “A madman’s tales. Mark would do anything to see us crash and burn — anything. You told me you just wanted to be left alone, Vic, to concentrate on research, to let your people do the work for you. And for that to happen, you’ve got to trust me.”

“I trust you,” Victor lied. “But I have to see my brother.”

Victor felt Linda’s hand on his shoulder. Irina stared at him as though he’d magically transformed into a Canadian moose.

“Your brother is a terrorist,” she said.

“Maybe. But if he’s right…”

“He’s wrong. I practically run this company, Vic. Your wish to be left alone had been granted. Don’t you think I’d know if something freaky was going on?”

“Something freaky’s always going on,” Linda said, and gently squeezed Victor’s shoulder. “This is different.”

“This not different,” Irina countered. “Nothing’s ever different. He wants you dead. He wants me erased. He’s psychotic.”

“He might be right,” Victor said. “Nothing else matters.”

Irina turned and pressed her firm buttocks against the imaginary glass; the illusion was perfect. “Fine.” She turned back. “As for you, Linda, tell me… what makes you think you can march into my business partner’s office and tell him what to do?”

“I—”

“Yes” — Irina cocked her head — “you.” She took a step back, and put her hands on her hips. “You’re nothing but a glorified secretary. I’d made you one of the richest people in the country, and this is how you repay me? You. Who else?” She smiled. “Tell me, Linda… who are you?”

Victor had played this game before, too.

Linda looked at the floor, blushing. “We… we need to start preparing for Victor’s trip—”

“I didn’t ask you what we need to be doing. I asked you who you are.”

Victor had always admired Irina’s skill of turning conflict into sex. They were similar that way: everything was a game; sex, doubly so. He clicked his tongue in anticipation, looked at Linda like a hungry animal at a piece of meat. Linda’s skirt was the color of an ocean wave and reached below her knees, but that’s where her conservatism ended. The elastic fabric stretched tightly across the curves of her breasts, the deep V of her blouse running past her cleavage, down to her navel. “Answer her.”

“I am a slut,” Linda replied without lifting her gaze. “I am your dirty slut; a cunt; do with me as you please.”

“Good girl,” said Irina. “Now, Vic, what do you think we should do with her for being such an insolent bitch?”

Victor stood, walked around his desk, and put his hands on Linda’s shoulders. She shuddered as if hit by an electric shock. He smiled and wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck, pushed her head to the desk. “I think we should punish her,” he said, lifting Linda’s skirt up to her waist. He examined her tanned butt cheeks, separated by the red line of her thong.

Victor smacked her with an open palm.

“Ow!”

“’Ow’ is incorrect,” Irina said. “Victor, would you be so kind?”

“With pleasure.” He unbuckled his belt. “How many?”

Linda tried to raise her head, but Victor pushed her back down, pressing his crotch against her butt.

“Five. On each side.”

“With pleasure,” he said again, and he stepped back, folded his belt in two, then brought it down hard on Linda’s left ass cheek. Leather smacked against skin. She jerked, but remained quiet.

“One,” Irina said.

He smacked Linda’s other ass cheek. A red stripe remained. “Two.” Another strike. “Three.” Another. “Four.” Linda half-subdued a squeal. With “five,” her entire body shook, yet she kept her head down and her hands on the desk. She cried out on strike six. Strike eight brought a muffled whine. Victor’s last hit came the hardest; the belt snapped against her flesh, and Linda screamed a short scream.

“Ten,” Irina counted.

Victor looked at his work. Linda’s ass had become the color of her underwear, her muscles contracting in spasms. He grabbed her panties and pulled them down with one hand, licked two fingers and touched her between the legs. He slid both fingers inside. She was ready.

He put the belt on her back and dropped his pants. Victor wrapped the belt around Linda’s neck and, grasping one end in each hand, raised her head up, forcing her to look at Irina as he entered her from behind.

Victor kicked her legs apart and fucked her hard, intense, holding her head up by the belt as though riding an animal, choking it for control. He eased the pressure occasionally, giving her small chances to breathe before tightening the belt again, warm, wet, deep, inside her, hips against hips.

When he was ready, Victor let go of the belt, grabbed Linda by the hair, and came inside. Linda’s head fell back onto the desk. He watched his sperm trickle down her thigh before locking eyes with

Irina, who watched him from across the room.

"I love you," she said.

* * *

The elevator doors opened without a sound, and Victor stepped into the subterranean corridor. Graffiti depicting people engaged in all types of sexual activity adorned the walls amidst a detailed painting of a bloody Viking battle that morphed into a raging sea, and finally into the stars of space. Dozens of electric cables, both thick and thin, ran from the elevator to the metal door at the corridor's end. In some places, the plaster had fallen off, revealing the red bricks underneath. The scent of moss hung in the humid air. It smelled like home.

Victor opened the door and stepped inside. Few people knew of Server Room Thirteen; the name was a ruse. There were no servers on the lowest level of the Dreamweb LLC Headquarters. Instead, a leather chair fit for a home cinema experience sat in the center of the room. Cables coiled around it in chaotic knots. A motorcycle helmet hung from the ceiling on a metal cord, connected via a spiderweb of wires to the computers lining the walls; the same technology he and Mark had used to create Irina, the same technology she'd been begging him to use to upload himself. He knew Irina was lonely — she was unique — but there wasn't much he could do about it. He would've sooner had his dick pierced, than live with two of himself in the world. And Irina's own solution to this problem had held little appeal.

Victor fell into the seat, took a UF205 capsule out of his enameled pillbox, swallowed it, and pulled the helmet over his head. The in-built headphones went *click, click, click* in uneven intervals. He closed his eyes and prepared for submersion.

* * *

He'd jumped into the Source before — it was an inevitable part of his job as the company's president — but he still couldn't get used to the experience. The dreamweb, as he'd called it, was not a virtual reality in the sense of how novelists from the eighties had imagined it. The software was a means to an end, not the end in itself.

The web — the reality plane beyond the physical world which connected everything and everyone — spread around him in a network of interconnected nodes, each representing a worldspace someone had built. Millions of imaginary worlds created by his company's customers pulsated in all colors of the rainbow. He

recognized a green node for an urban horror world where users could try being a taxi driver in a post-apocalyptic future, next to the orange sphere of a distant off-world colony, where adventures awaited the brave. Another node was a mansion for the most depraved to turn their fantasies to (relative) reality. It floated under yet another node that led to a world with no grounding in any physical rules whatsoever; you could be a snake one minute, and a ball of energy the next.

Victor transferred his disembodied self to the node-cluster of worldspaces by the users from the Czech Republic. Diving in from the Source gave him powers beyond any others' inside the dreamweb, and this was the time to put those powers to use. With his mind, he reached out toward the nodes, feeling for the psychic residue of their creators and searching for emotions, thoughts… anything that would give him insight into Mark's recent movements across the web. Instead, he found lust, greed, gluttony, murder, and the worst of all sins: fear. Lots of fear. It cascaded from the nodes in waterfalls of emotion, tingling his hypertrophied senses like God's promise of the end of the world.

He felt Irina's presence before he'd heard her voice.

"Hello, Victor. Admiring the view?"

"Nothing freaky going on, you say? Why is everyone afraid?"

"Mark's propaganda. I told you. You don't believe me. It saddens me. Let's play a game."

"No more games. This is serious—"

"Everything's a game," she said. "You told me so yourself. You win this one, and fine, I'll buy into Mark's paranoia, get the EU parliament to join you on your mad quest to limit the dreamweb, do everything until your brother's proven *irrefutably* wrong." Victor noticed the emphasis in her voice. "But if I win…"

"You want me to upload myself."

"Precisely."

"This is bullshit. You have to help me anyway. I own this company! No games. Just do it."

"You don't own me, Victor. I am not some thing you can order around. You let me run your corporation, and look where it got us. Five million subscribers in less than two years! A branch in every country that matters! Enough money to buy anything and anyone we want. I know what I'm doing, and you'd better believe it. Amuse me. One last game. Please?"

"I'm not uploading myself."

"Fine. You won't have to. You win, I do what I said: we start losing money until your fool of a brother is put back in his place. I win… well, if I win, I get my satisfaction. Besting my creator has to

got be worth something, right?"

"Satisfaction?"

"That's right. Satisfaction."

"No more games, Irina. You don't want to help me, that's fine, so be it. We're more than capable of looking into this ourselves."

"You? You mean, you and Mark?"

This conversation is over, Victor thought. The sensation of Irina's presence grew thick like the air before a storm, and the pulsating worldspaces around him faded until only one remained: a green ball of energy, constantly morphing its shape.

Tentacles of light reached toward Victor's consciousness…

* * *

Victor instinctively threw the heavy plane down, and the IL-2's engine roared. Bullets flew past his wing, one tracing a black skid mark across the paint. This was no good. The IL-2 wasn't designed to dodge two enemy fighter planes at once. He looked in the mirror. Two Stukas were coming at him from the clouds.

Irina, you bitch.

Victor threw the throttle to the right, dodging another spray from the Stukas' cannons, then threw his plane's nose up and took a sharp turn. As the Luftwaffe planes passed him, he aimed for the closest one and pressed the trigger. He got lucky; he hit the German aircraft straight in the engine. It went down like a butterfly caught on fire.

The remaining Stuka wheeled around and came at Victor from the front, its oversized landing gear giving it the appearance of a hawk going in for the kill. Victor pulled the trigger. The enemy fired in return. They threw their planes side to side in a death dance; two pilots who'd never known defeat. The distance shortened. Bullets flew. One tore through Victor's left wing, and he started to trail smoke. His guns stopped; he was out of rounds. Apparently so was the enemy, for he'd also ceased firing as they closed in on each other with the determination of the already dead.

The planes met in mid-air. Metal bent. Something hit Victor in the chest, and the cockpit erupted in flames. Irina's voice sneaked inside his mind through the pain.

"I win."

* * *

Victor tore the helmet off, a high-pitched ringing piercing his

brain. He touched his ears and his fingers came back wet with blood. He struggled from the chair, but fell to his knees after the first step. Countless seconds of pain later, he realized Linda stood in front of him, the heavy door open wide behind her. She was saying something.

Linda helped him up from the floor. The ringing in his ears turned to absolute silence. Victor pointed at the blood running down his cheeks, and Linda touched him on the neck, then took out her mobile phone and dialed a number. A doctor, Victor hoped.

Linda hung up, typed something on the touchscreen, and turned the phone for him to see. It read: *She is uploading Gabor.*

"Fuck!" Victor couldn't hear himself, so he said it again. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" It was useless. Irina had made him deaf. The horror of this thought hadn't fully sunk in, but he had little time to waste feeling sorry for himself.

He grabbed Linda's phone out of her hand and typed: *Plane. Prague. 1 hour.*

5
Air

This is your captain speaking, scrolled the text across Victor's smartglass illuminator beside the First Class passenger seat. *We have reached the altitude of ten thousand meters, estimated time of arrival to Prague: forty minutes. Enjoy the flight.*

Victor brought up the source code for the alpha version of Dreamweb LLC's newest product — a light pattern designed to stimulate the brain into a dreamweb dive. He wrote the algorithm on the way to the airport. His sales team would be ecstatic; now even the deaf could enjoy the hidden world he and Mark had discovered. He himself didn't give a damn. All that mattered was getting to Irina's and Gabor's thought nodes before they did any more damage to themselves or to others.

A little late for that now, he thought. Victor opened another window on the screen — a camera still from the Bogazici Institute of Istanbul, where Irina had uploaded Gabor's consciousness — which showed a chair and a helmet above it. The helmet, and the entire room in the capture, bore the trademarks of a neurotech research lab, shining floors and sterile metallic surfaces abound. Under the helmet, a young blond man lay dead. According to the Institute's security detail, Gabor had washed down three packs of tranquilizers with a bottle of Russian Standard, to join Irina in the afterlife in more ways than one.

Victor closed the window and reviewed the code, which refused to produce any effect. He'd earlier taken three capsules of UF205, and had stared at the lights dancing across the smartglass for half an hour straight. Yet his mind refused to leave his body. *Belief*, he thought. Across thousands of years of human history, there were always those who'd balanced the scales by turning the world one shade lighter at a time. And they truly believed they could do it; they believed in the goodness of the world first, and the goodness in themselves later. They were the happy people, humanity's martyrs.

Belief is what I need.

He started to work. Every keystroke became another building block for the logic loops of faith, transcribed in the language of mathematics. By the time he finished, his Armani shirt was soaked in sweat. He swallowed a capsule and pressed "play."

Nothing happened. The plane shook.

The door to his on-board office flew open and Linda rushed in, her face twisted in panic. "It's happening! The pilot's gone!"

“What do you mean, gone?”

“Gone, disappeared, stopped existing. I was talking to him and then, in the blink of an eye, he—”

“The co-pilot?”

“Flying the plane. For now. He’s in shock. Victor, we have to do something.”

Focus, he thought. *Focus, focus, focus*. “Get over here.”

Linda took a hesitant step forward, and Victor grabbed her by the wrist, pulled her down to her knees. “What I’m going to tell you is very important,” he said. “I need you to suck my dick.” He almost added, *The fate of the world depends on it*.

“Victor! Did you hear what I just said?”

“Yes! And you?”

She nodded.

He unzipped his pants and pulled them down past his hips, along with his underwear. Linda looked him squarely in the face, and then at his limp penis, and crawled closer. She ran her tongue down his shaft; her lips lingered on his balls, gentle kisses rocked by turbulence. Victor opened the pillbox, took the fifth capsule for the day, and stared at the lines of light as they weaved impossible geometric patterns across the smartglass. Linda’s mouth closed over him as he grew harder, willed himself to believe, to turn the sensation of pleasure into the faith he so desperately needed. He concentrated on the blood pulsating through his veins, on the beating of his heart, on the Zen state of pure love of a dream within a dream.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he was somewhere else.

* * *

His name was no longer Victor. He was Surl Adiz, and he remembered his every reincarnation over three thousand Standard Galactic Years of existence. His latest form had been that of Man, one of the few sent to discover and colonize new worlds; a mission to create Man, where no Man had been before. His partner, and the only other crew member on their terraformer-class vessel — the female Man, Surl Adiza — entered the observation deck.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” she said, looking at the third planet light years from a star the planet’s new inhabitants would surely call The Sun.

“Do you think it’s worth it?” he asked. “Creating another race in our image? How well do you think we did, if we have to roam the galaxies to plant the seeds of doomed civilizations?”

“They’re not doomed,” Surl Adiza replied. “They have a choice.”

* * *

Victor beat his small yellow wings furiously as he flew over the river dividing The Garden of Slaves. His butterfly senses were attuned to the movement of the wind, not self-observation, yet he knew through the ancestral memories of his insect body he’d once been Man, and the people who worked in The Garden were not.

The naked, navel-less *men* and *women* labored silently on both banks, pushing the terraforming process along. They were drones with no understanding of good or evil; flesh constructs created in Man’s image, designed to obey neural net instructions recorded millions of years ago. Victor twirled his little body to catch a gust of wind, then landed on a lily in the shadow of an apple tree in the center of a circular clearing. A man and a woman stood nearby.

The woman’s tanned curves seemed beautiful, even to a butterfly. The man, not so much; he jerked erratically as if holding onto scarce threads of impulse control. Not even a *man*, really; this being was merely an animal stripped of all awareness of the world’s goodness. The butterfly switched its attention back to the woman and nearly dissolved in the multidimensional depths of her eyes.

“Hello, Victor,” she said to the butterfly, and to the man at her side she offered a half-eaten apple as red as her hair.

* * *

A forced dive out of the dreamweb at an altitude of ten thousand meters was not a pretty thing. Victor snapped back to his physical body, spasming in orgasm. The visual cues on the smartglass illuminator had lost their magic meaning; the line between realities blurred, and he pushed himself down Linda’s throat, coming as she gagged.

He pulled her off by her hair and switched the smartglass to full transparency. The jet wing turbine no longer existed, as if the plane had been designed to be an air glider all along. Then he switched to the pilot’s camera feed. The cabin was empty.

“Linda,” he said.

She looked up, wiping her mouth.

“I didn’t get them; I didn’t get to the thought node. She threw me out. I need your help.” He sat her on his lap and prepared the smartglass for another dreamweb dive. “Look at these lines,” he said,

opened the pillbox, and gave her a capsule.

Linda narrowed her eyes, and swallowed the pill.

"The world is out of balance," he continued. "Truth has crashed with belief, and we are about to die. Look at the screen. Think of truth. Think of death. Think of war. Think how everything's connected. Think of a fight, think of you and me against the pain of the world. Imagine letting go. Imagine you're a butterfly."

"We *are*," she said.

* * *

But they were *not* butterflies. They were leaders of a Spec Ops unit preparing for an ascent up a snow-covered ridge, gloved hands tight around the grips of their automatic rifles.

"What's the latest intel on enemy numbers?" one of Victor's men asked.

"Insurmountable," he replied.

Linda pushed her goggles up to her forehead. "Irina and Gabor are holed up in a mansion at the top of the mountain with guard posts at nearly every turn. Most of you will not make it, but some of us must."

"Some of us will," Victor said.

He cocked his rifle and cried, "Hua! Hua! Hua!" and the squad bellowed, "Hua!" in return.

Two checkpoints later, they lost a man to an ambush. The firefights were short and intense, with too few breaks in between. Bullets flew. Men died.

Linda was covering Victor from a sandbag encampment at the thirteenth checkpoint, when the last comrade-in-arms they'd conjured up had caught a bullet to the head, brains splattering onto Victor's already blood-stained camo. Victor let instinct guide his aim; the rifle recoiled, and the last enemy soldier fell to the ground. They'd reached the top of the mountain.

A row of columns split the rock like teeth in a giant skull — the entrance to Irina's mansion. Victor's limbs went cold, and he imagined his plane losing altitude. How much time did they have left? Forty seconds? Five? Time was subjective. The air grew thicker.

Gabor walked out into the open, flames licking at his skin. Victor *knew* it was him, even though Gabor's face had melted away from a charred skull, blue pupils in vacant eye sockets glowing like distant supernovas.

"Stop grinning," Victor said. "The world's disappearing."

The burning man halted. "Not *my* world," he said without

opening his mouth. “Think about it. You are in an altered state. These chemicals your company brews under Mark’s patents are messing with your head, man. Nothing’s disappearing. Everything’s cool.”

“Everything’s cool? You fucking killed yourself, do you realize that? You are not *you*. Irina’s boyfriend’s dead.”

“Say hi to Irina’s boyfriend 2.0,” he replied.

Victor tapped his heel, signaling Linda to open fire. She pulled the trigger once, and Gabor closed the distance to her in a blur. He hit Linda in the chest with both hands — a flash, *fire* — and she flew through the air, disappearing beneath the clouds off the edge of the mountain.

Victor screamed, and went into a sprint, firing blindly.

Gabor zigzagged, heat turning snow into glass, and the burning man met Victor mid-jump. Victor transformed himself into cold water, splashing against the flames, parts of him evaporating; fire and frost caught in a battle of wills, where Victor’s was stronger. He held on to Gabor as long as he could before letting go and falling to the bare ground, again human, again in pain.

His enemy had hit the ground a considerable distance away. Victor tried to move. No such luck. The transmutation had taken all of his power. Instead, he watched Gabor rise to his feet. With the flames extinguished, he was a terrifying creature to look at. He picked up Victor’s rifle, took aim, and Victor closed his eyes, wondering if it would’ve been better had he never been born at all.

A few seconds later however, Victor still felt alive. He opened his eyes. Gabor’s body had been split from the top down, two piles of flesh smoking in the snow. An armored samurai with a *naginata* sword stood behind the corpse, his black metal mask in a sinister smile. Victor tried to speak, but no sound came.

The samurai slid the sword into the sheath upon his back and removed the mask. It was Mark. *Always with the grand entrances*, Victor thought.

“Hello, brother,” Mark said.

6
Revelations

"Let me tell you a story," Mark said, as the mansion within the mountain dissolved like the snow under their feet and the landscape shifted, the skyline turning into a white space without walls or a ceiling. Irina sat cross-legged nearby, a laptop resting on her pale thighs.

Her thought node, Victor surmised, and looked over at his brother. Mark had traded his heavy armor for a pair of jeans and a Bruce Lee T-shirt. He looked younger without the dreads.

"What are you doing here?" Victor asked.

"Come on, big brother, don't you want to hear my story?"

"He does," Irina answered for him.

No, he didn't. Victor wanted to erase Irina and Gabor and to prevent the singularity catastrophe Irina so desired, not to listen to another one of Mark's sermons. What *was* he doing here? Mark and Irina had been working together, obviously, but to what end? What could a neo-human want from the man who'd dedicated the last two years of his life fighting dreamweb access on all fronts? Mark and Irina were antagonists to one another down to the bone, thought and deed, so their planning anything together was surreal.

Then an idea hit like a splash of cold water: what if Mark wasn't Mark… what if he, like Irina and Gabor, was a disembodied consciousness inside the dreamweb? What if *this* Mark was another neo-human, a ghost, and his real brother lay dead somewhere in Prague, wrists cut open with a smile on his face, that same terrible smile Victor saw on Irina's lips when he'd burst into her apartment two years ago?

No. It cannot be.

"I'm not dead," Mark said as if reading his thoughts. "You, on the other hand…" He let the silence hang.

"I'm what?"

"What's the last thing you remember before the dive?"

Victor thought, then answered: "The plane."

"The plane, with nobody to fly it," Irina said, and a chill ran down Victor's nape. Irina snapped her fingers and the air around them rippled into a three-sixty degree view of Victor's onboard office, the red digit *5* counting down the time before the crash — five seconds, four seconds, three seconds. "Did you think I'd just let you erase me?"

Victor watched himself slouched against the illuminator with Linda on his lap, who'd leaned into him in her dreamweb slumber as

the seconds ticked away. The picture jerked, Victor's seatbelts strained, and Linda's body smashed against the ceiling. The illuminator cracked. Linda snapped open her eyes, but disappeared from view before she could scream.

"No!"

"No?" Mark said. "Linda knew the risks. You had no choice. What do you think happened to her when Gabor fried her on that mountain?

"How should I—"

"Exactly," Irina intervened. "How should you have known that any of this was going to happen? Your brother was right: the physical reality was disappearing."

Was? "But… not anymore?"

"Not anymore," Mark said. "After Irina confirmed my suspicions that the dreamweb was damaging our world, she'd set out to kill you before you erased her thought node."

"I succeeded, too," she said. "Sorry, Victor. It was the only way."

"But if I'm dead, how am I here? Wait — you went and uploaded me, Mark, didn't you? You son of a bitch!"

"Don't you talk about our mother."

Victor took a deep, steadying breath and concentrated on his racing heart. It slowed down. He breathed out. "Okay. Okay. Fine. So now I'm like her." Victor nodded at Irina. "Now you have to erase us. Cut access to the dreamweb. Planes are falling from the skies, man, people are fucking disappearing. You win. Shut it down."

"Shut it down?" Mark said. "You think it's that easy? All you need is a drug and some noise. Apparently you don't even need the noise anymore. Congratulations. Good fucking job. It can't be shut down. But it can broken — permanently."

"What do you mean? What did you two do?

"You did everything yourself, Victor." Irina stood up, her breasts bouncing from the sudden movement. "Why did you have to bring Linda to Prague? You knew it'd be dangerous."

"Wait a minute," he said. "Are you implying it's my fault you crashed our plane and killed us? Really?"

"I'm not implying," she said, menace in her voice. "She was my friend."

Another image projected itself around them. Victor recognized the apartment Irina and Linda once shared when Irina was a twenty-three-year-old arts student. The two young women were sitting on a cozy-looking couch, both smiling, drinking coffee and sharing a joint.

"How well did you even know her, Vic?" Irina asked. "You worked with her every day. You fucked her every other day. But did you actually know anything about her?"

The living room faded to an image of a black-haired girl of about ten wearing a red dress with white polka dots. Young Linda held a dandelion in her left hand. She waved hello with her right (or perhaps*, goodbye*), and the picture disappeared.

"What happened to her?" Victor asked.

"I tried to copy her as well," Mark said, "but Gabor got to her faster."

"Is she dead?"

"Not any less than you are, brother. There's no death in the dreamweb, not really. Only change. She's all around us, a part of the web, an extension of the will of the world, so to speak."

"What are you talking about?"

"Can I tell you my story now?"

"Mark, what the fuck, man! What's going on? I'm dead. Made into a ghost. I get it. Linda's dead. Made into… thin air, I guess. You said you managed to put this dreamweb business under control. How? What did you do, Mark? And what are you doing inside Irina's thought node?"

Irina pressed up against Victor's back and hugged him. Her body felt warm, eager. Her breath tickled his shoulder.

"Do you know the word 'sonder'?" she whispered into his ear.

"Of course I know the word 'sonder.' What the fuck, Irina? Mark…?"

"Tell him, Mark. Tell him everything."

Mark began, "Let me tell you a story, brother," then he paused, reconsidered. "Better yet, let me *show* you a story."

* * *

It was dark, but there was no mistake: Victor stood barefoot next to the apple tree in the Garden of Slaves, though something was blocking the sun. He looked up to a metal disc as big as a city that hovered in the sky.

Mark's voice spoke like a movie narration inside Victor's brain. "This was the beginning," he said. "Genesis. The creation."

The image zoomed round to show the flying disc in cross section. The spaceship was a labyrinth of machines, engines, storage units, automated science laboratories, rooms with caged animals, engineering bays, hangars, and infrastructure beyond human categorization. At the heart of the space-faring vessel was the command deck.

There, a man and a woman stood naked, watching the world below. They held hands, yet there was nothing romantic about their

touch; they'd simply grasped one other like lovers on a sinking ship.

"Meet Surl Adiz and Surl Adiza," Mark said, "the progenitors of all life on Earth, and the technology they'd brought from their homeworld."

The spaceship melted into the background. Grass turned to sand.

Half a hundred men dragged a stone monolith across the desert toward a pyramid on the horizon. Others studied papyrus scrolls as they inspected the work. Some men just stared at the sky.

"These beings taught us astronomy, navigation, the principles of language and mathematics; in essence, they'd taught us about the dreamweb. They'd always been a part of it, on a much deeper level than we ever were. Imagine telepathy, imagine feeling every life form around you and knowing the connectivity of all things, at all times. Imagine how that feels."

"Must be nuts."

"Well said. It *is* nuts. But not for them. Their race is ancient, attuned to the whispers of the world. We humans, on the other hand…"

The pyramid faded from the horizon, and the sand turned to a cobblestone road. A massive tower stood in front of them, its top hidden in the clouds, birds circling it and singing songs to the wind.

"They gave us a gift," Mark said, "and we threw it away."

A low rumbling came, and the ground began to shake. Irina's hands tightened around Victor's waist. He kept his balance.

"In our arrogance, we decided we could be like them," Mark went on, "that we could be one with the stars, that we could be more than they ever were. The creators decided we must be put back in our place."

A stone fell away from the tower, then another. Its wall cracked, and a part of it slid down, disintegrating into small pieces, while thunder roared through the air. Dust enveloped them, finding its way into Victor's ears, nose, hair. He shut his eyes.

"So they limited our connection to the dreamweb, almost like turning a valve to the least possible setting; no more telepathy, no more bonding with fellow living creatures, no more magic. And still, we humans remained deeply spiritual creatures. We always knew the world was more than the eye could see. On some level, most of us understood that death was but a change; the assimilation back into the immaterial, the ultimate dreamweb dive. The mystics and the shamans knew it best. Quite a few chemistry students knew as well, like Yours Truly, for example. Open your eyes."

Victor did. They were in Victor's laboratory, where the orphan brothers, he and Mark, sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by stacks of paper, pizza slices, coffee cups, an electric synthesizer, and

Mark's entire chemistry kit. A ray of light shone through the open dome, painting the young men in stripes of gold.

"We did what our civilization couldn't do in ten thousand years: we found a way to dive into the dreamweb."

Irina slid her hand down Victor's chest and rested it on his crotch, breathing heavily in his ear. "Then you met me," she said.

"And then you met her."

The laboratory morphed into Margaret Island. Irina walked along a running lane by the river, head bowed, lips tight from the philosophical musings of a twenty-three-year-old diagnosed with cancer. Victor watched her approach his bench, where they started small talk, shared a joint. He was dressed in that ridiculous monkey suit Mark had forced him on a bet to wear for a day. Irina didn't seem to mind.

Scenes of what had come next flashed one after the other: Irina's upload; the suicide; Irina inside the dreamweb, helping Victor run the company; Linda; Mark, starting an activist group to ban the dreamweb; the plane; Linda again, crushed against the ceiling; Gabor, a balding young man in a pair of shorts and a tight yellow T-shirt.

"Ah yes, Gabor," Mark said. "Gabor… Did you know Gabor made a dreamweb dive every day to be with Irina, after she'd died in the physical world? What I did for him at Bogazici was his dream come true."

"You? It was you?"

"It was us," Irina whispered into his ear. "I was so lonely. I begged Mark to help." She nibbled on the ear before continuing. "Your brother lied. What he did wasn't help; what he did was *murder*."

"Not murder," Mark said. "He did that all on his own. I just gave him the drugs, the booze, and the razor blade."

"Why, Mark?"

"Because it was the only way, brother. I needed at least one more neo-human inside the dreamweb." Mark crossed his hands. "The dreamweb was never made to handle human input; our minds simply aren't on that level. Every worldspace somebody built was like surgery performed with a chainsaw on the fabric of the web's reality. Finally, time came when it could no longer handle the twisted minds of us mortal fuckers, and it started sucking parts of our world into itself. Irina even gave it a nudge in your direction. Enter missing pilots and a falling plane. Hello, and welcome to the afterlife."

"What does this have to do with Gabor?"

"Shhh…" Irina whispered. "Let him finish."

"Everything. The dreamweb is not a piece of technology; it's a living thing that self-regulates. It had adjusted itself to Irina's presence, but it'd had a hard time. I figured if I introduced another

neo-human to it — the more unstable the better — it would do what any living system would do in such case: it would severe the connection with our world entirely."

"You based this all on guesswork?"

"It was very scientific guesswork."

"And?"

"It worked. The world's no longer disappearing, but… well, the damage is permanent. The dreamweb's rearranging itself. In a few minutes, there *will* be no more dreamweb for the people of Earth. We won't be able to feel it at all, to feel the world around us, the auras of one another, much less dive into it. No more premonitions, no more déjà vu. Trees would die, and probably most of the animals. And when our time comes, the essence of who we are will never touch the dreamweb; we will be forever gone. It was a compromise I was willing to make. If not for this, our world would have simply ceased to be."

Victor lowered his head. "Because of us," he said.

"Yes. Because of us."

"What now?"

The room rippled into a meadow by a roaring waterfall crashing into rock. A catamaran with a retracted sail stood on shore where the rocks gave way to grass.

"There's only one more thing," Mark said. "I don't know how much time I have here, but it's not long. We won't meet again."

"And so I said we'd make this special." Irina walked around Victor to face him. She kissed him, her lips against his like butterfly wings, then got to her knees and pulled down his pants. Victor looked at Mark, thinking that if sex was the gateway to hell, the three of them would dance with devil. Mark removed his shirt.

Irina gently wrapped her fingers around Victor's balls, licking him between kisses. He closed his eyes, his head clearing as his body reacted. *Sex,* he thought. *The union of bodies and minds. First comes the mind, then comes the body.* He looked down. Irina had spread her legs wider and was helping herself with her fingers, her tongue running along the length of his dick. Victor took her by the hair and slid deeper down her throat. Mark came closer, naked and ready. He got on his knees behind her, licked two fingers, and put them between Irina's legs. She almost choked. Victor released her, and the moment the edge of his cock left her lips, Mark grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head up.

Victor caught a glimpse of Irina's green eyes as Mark entered her, before Mark pushed her head back down onto Victor's cock. She grabbed onto his hips as Mark entered her from behind, fucking her hard and fast, and Victor had to lock her elbows to hold her in place as he slid along her throat — all the way in, and all the way out. His

mind was empty. Only body remained — instinct, pleasure, desire. He wasn't sure how long that went on, but when he finally finished, when his body finally spasmed and he came into Irina's mouth, for that one moment, Victor felt more alive than he'd ever remembered. Or, at any rate, being dead could have been worse. *We're far from done, my friend,* he thought, pulling out to give her some room to breathe.

Mark pulled out as well, then lay on his back.

"Sit on him," Victor told Irina, as she wiped cum from her chin with her forearm. Head bowed, she crawled over to Mark and did as she was told, mounting him, freckled shoulders and pale back stark against the cascading blue waters before them. Victor watched Irina twist her body on Mark's cock for a while, before coming closer and pushing her head down to Mark's.

"Spread your ass."

She did, and Victor entered her, feeling his brother through the thin layer of skin. Irina groaned. Mark put his hand on her throat, and Victor slid deeper into her ass.

They fucked like wild animals, bringing each other from tenderness to violence and back again, sweat rolling down their bodies, mouths open in screams of lust.

They continued until they were satisfied, until all of Irina's holes had been explored, until the three of them lay expended on the grass, watching the waterfall hit the stones and explode into millions of droplets at a time.

"I love you," Mark said.

Victor looked to his side, but his brother was no longer there.

He took Irina's hand in his and breathed in, inhaling as much air as his lungs would hold. The water continued to fall. He squeezed Irina's fingers. They had all the time in the world.

– THE END –

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To Maria V.K.

for her support

in times of peril

Edited by Kimberly Grenfell
Cover art by Yvan Quinet
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This book contains graphic depictions of sexual situations and violence and is not recommended for persons under 18 years of age. This is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people or events are coincidental.